

Screen



Irony, nihilism and the 'smart' film

Timespaces in spectacular cinema

Childhood, class and memory in *Seven Up!*

Gender and magic in teen film and television

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End (Thora Birch) in *Ghost World*
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Irony, nihilism and the new American 'smart' film

JEFFREY SCONCE

In a 1998 editorial for the *Los Angeles Times*, film critic Kenneth Turan bemoaned what he described as an onslaught of 'pointlessly and simplistically grim films'. Linking titles such as *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998) and *Your Friends and Neighbors* (Neil LaBute, 1998) to such unlikely cultural brethren as Andres Serrano's 1989 artwork 'Piss Christ', performer Sandra Bernhard and 'extreme' sports such as snowboarding, Turan complained that a new generation of misguided filmmakers had created a cinematic ethos where 'the lust for the grim precludes the good'.¹ Not one to skimp on hyperbole, Turan compared directors like Solondz, Berg and LaBute to the scientists working on the Manhattan Project,² who, like children 'not realizing that they're in danger of having gone too far until they've already done it', might be crossing aesthetic and moral boundaries best left untested.³

Turan's sentiments obviously resonated within a certain segment of the cultural Right, and were posted on a number of evangelical websites as further evidence of the nation's moral decline. In the same week, *LA Weekly* film critic Manohla Dargis coined the phrase 'the new nihilism'. 'It doesn't seem too sensational to suggest that right now in this country we are being inundated with a cinema of hate', observes Dargis, 'a cinema that encourages our sadism, our scorn and, worst of all, our total disinterest toward the world, other human beings, and just maybe ourselves.'⁴

This would seem an undue amount of hysteria over a handful of films and the bespectacled audiences that love them. As the above comments suggest, however, a certain style of cinema has recently

1 Kenneth Turan 'Fade to pitch black' *Los Angeles Times* 22 November 1998 np

2 The Manhattan Project was the code name for the US government's atomic weapons research and design programme during World War II: a project that culminated with the creation of the atomic bomb and the eventual destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

3 Turan 'Fade to pitch black'

4 Manohla Dargis 'Whatever the new nihilism' *LA Weekly* 26 November 1998, np URL <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/99/01/film-dargis.shtml> [26 November 1998]

become a particularly active battleground within a larger moral and artistic war, leading some commentators into a familiar chain of indictment reaching back through critiques of cynicism, irony, postmodernism, secular humanism and cultural relativism, all the way to the grand architect of modern disaffection Nietzsche, at which point the concerned and conscientious critic can take a quick right turn to invoke the spectre of incipient Nazism 'Nihilism is nothing new', notes Dargis, 'but it's hard to recall another moment in movie history outside maybe Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia in which we've been subjected to so many films stripped bare of rational moral judgment and politics both.'⁵

5 Ibid

No doubt there is a new sensibility at work in certain corners of North American cinema and culture over the past decade, one that manifests a predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism and, yes, even nihilism. Such cinema has many variations: the arch emotional nihilism of Solondz in *Storytelling* (2001), *Happiness* and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), and of LaBute in *Your Friends and Neighbors* and *In the Company of Men* (1997), Alexander Payne's 'blank' political satires *Election* (1999) and *Citizen Ruth* (1996), Hal Hartley's postmodern screwball comedies *The Unbelievable Truth* (1990), *Trust* (1991) and *Henry Fool* (1998), post-*Pulp Fiction* black comedies of violence such as *Very Bad Things*, *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999) and *2 Days in the Valley* (John Herzfeld, 1996); Wes Anderson's bittersweet *Bottle Rocket* (1994), *Rushmore* (1998) and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001); P.T. Anderson's operatic odes to the San Fernando valley *Magnolia* (1998) and *Boogie Nights* (1997); the 'cold' melodramas of *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan, Canada, 1997) and *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995); and the 'matter-of-fact' surrealism of *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001). In 1991, Richard Linklater's docudrama of hipster anomie, *Slacker*, not only captured aspects of this sensibility through its desultory formal structure, but also served as a veritable ethnographic record of the emerging collegiate/bohemian subculture of irony that would so dominate popular taste in 1990s culture. Ten years later, Terry Zwigoff's and Dan Clowes's collaboration on *Ghost World* (2001) updated the slacker lexicon for a new generation while demonstrating the contemporary film industry's complete integration of such disaffection as a marketing target and strategy. 'Accentuate the negative', read the ad campaign.

Taken together, these admittedly disparate yet often ideologically sympathetic films suggest an interesting shift in the strategies of contemporary 'art cinema', here defined as movies marketed in explicit counterdistinction to mainstream Hollywood fare as 'smarter', 'artier', and more 'independent' (however questionable and manufactured such distinctions might actually be).⁶ Certainly there are significant differences between the shaggy philosophy and

6 For an interesting account of the ambiguous line between indie cinema and Hollywood see James Schamus 'A rant' in Jon Lewis (ed.) *The End of Cinema as We Know It* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) pp. 253–60.

filmmaking of *Slacker* and the clinical polish of *The Ice Storm*, just as the surprising sentimentality of *Ghost World* has little in common with the excruciating carnival of adolescent horrors in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. And where does one place a film like *The Straight Story* (David Lynch, 1999), a profoundly sincere story made 'ironic' solely by the inter- and extratextual reputation of its director? Always a vague and contentious 'genre', the art film is an even more untidy category in the 1990s than in decades past, especially as it extends certain European art-house traditions (as in the radically *unironic* work of Lars von Trier or the Werner Herzog-inspired films of Harmony Korine) while also morphing into the more postmodern playground of 'indie' cinema. In fact, the films listed above might be better thought of as 'smart' cinema, an American school of filmmaking that survives (and at times thrives) at the symbolic and material intersection of 'Hollywood', the 'indie' scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call 'art' films. As Murray Smith writes, 'there is a kind of cinema, fashionable in the 1990s, that has evolved through a complex mix of antagonism toward and dependence on Hollywood, feeding it and at the same time living off it'.⁷ While these films vary greatly in terms of conditions of production and financing, they are almost invariably placed by marketers, critics and audiences in symbolic opposition to the imaginary mass-cult monster of mainstream, commercial, Hollywood cinema (perhaps best epitomized by the 'dumb' films of Jerry Bruckheimer, Michael Bay and James Cameron). Not quite 'art' films in the sober Bergmanesque art-house tradition, nor 'Hollywood' films in the sense of 1200-screen saturation bombing campaigns, nor 'independent' films according to the DIY outsider credo, 'smart' films nevertheless share an aura of 'intelligence' that distinguishes them (and their audiences) from the perceived 'dross' (and 'rabble') of the mainstream multiplex.

Given this emphasis on the art of the smart (both in terms of filmmaking and marketing), one might argue that the above films have little more in common than their shared target market of younger, more educated, 'bohemian' audiences who frequent the artplexes now central to every European and North American city. And yet I would maintain that there is a 'sensitivity' in and around these films that does provide them with historical, thematic and even stylistic cohesion. 'Sensitivity' is an admittedly vague term, but no more so than 'structure of feeling' in cultural theory or 'tone' in narrative poetics – the two chief components that intersect to produce this 'sensitivity' in current smart cinema. The poetry of Raymond Williams's 'structure of feeling', of course, resides in the phrase's ability to combine sociological concerns for a cultural formation with the ineffable 'feeling' of being in the world at a particular historical moment ('as firm and definite as "structure" suggests', writes Williams, 'yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts

7 Murray Smith 'Smoke til you're blue in the face', in Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It*, pp. 277–86.

of our activity')⁸ Similarly, 'tone' suggests a property of a work that cannot be reduced to story, style or authorial disposition in isolation and that is itself only fully realized within a narrow historical moment. Engaging this smart sensibility in recent American cinema thus requires attention to both the sociocultural formation informing the circulation of these films (a 'smart' set) and a shared set of stylistic and thematic practices (a 'smart' aesthetic)

My aesthetic analysis of these films proceeds from a simple and perhaps self-evident premiss: while previous forms of art cinema concentrated on formal experimentation with film style and narrative structure as a means of critiquing the codes of 'bourgeois realism' and/or 'bourgeois society', the new smart cinema has for the most part re-embraced classical narrative strategies, instead experimenting with *tone* as a means of critiquing 'bourgeois' taste and culture. This is not to say that smart cinema is formally indistinguishable from mass-market movies, indeed, as we shall see, this cinema quite explicitly positions itself in opposition to 'mainstream' cinema even as it shares a common foundation in classical Hollywood style. Related to this new strategy for artistic distinction, American smart cinema has displaced the more activist emphasis on the 'social politics' of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema (especially in its 'political' wing), and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture.

The political gradations and divisions provoked by this 'aesthetic' can be gleaned from the range of terms used to describe these films: ironic, cynical, postmodern, relativist, nihilistic, and so on. While I agree that contemporary cinema does increasingly fade to pitch black, as Turan puts it, I would profoundly disagree with the political indictment of these films so frequently advanced in the circles of professional criticism. When critics castigate such cinema as 'apolitical' and 'amoral', I believe they confuse the cultivated illusion of blank disengagement in these films with actual moral and/or political apathy. All irony may confuse issues of tone and perspective, but no form of irony is truly disengaged from its material. Behind their veneer of studied detachment, cultivated disaffection and ironic posturing, many of these films are extremely politicized and even rather moralistic. Central to my analysis of the 'structure of feeling' informing this cinema and its audience, then, is the idea that irony, beyond existing as some ineffable cultural condition, is also a strategic gesture. To speak in an ironic tone is instantly to bifurcate one's audience into those who 'get it' and those who do not. The entire point of ironic address is to ally oneself with sympathetic peers and to distance oneself from the vast 'other' audience, however defined, which is often the target of the speaker's or artist's derision. If I think you are an idiot, I can use irony to

9 Appealing to this disaffection from mainstream taste in contemporary cinema has been used as a niche-marketing strategy. For example, when the influential mass critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert gave David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1996) the dreaded two thumbs down, their negative review was immediately incorporated in the film's ad campaign as 'two more good reasons to see *Lost Highway*'. Similarly, the DVD packaging for cult and critical favourite *Fight Club* (1999) features excerpts from other reviews that (in the minds of director David Fincher and his fans) 'didn't get the film'.

10 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

12 Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Knopf, 1999), p. 185.

insult you without getting punched in the face. If I think you are like-minded, we can use irony to laugh at, or express our disengagement from, those around us.⁹

If the new smart cinema is particularly attached to the trope of irony, as so many have complained, this is in large part due to a coalition of cultural producers and consumers who find this to be the most compelling voice through which to intervene in the contemporary cultural, artistic or political terrain. In this respect, the choice to trade in blank irony – a move made by so many filmmakers in the 1990s – exemplifies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'position-taking', a means of distinguishing one's work in relation to a larger aesthetic and cultural field of production.¹⁰ For 'smart' cinema to exist, after all, someone or something must be perceived and portrayed as 'stupid', a demarcation that can understandably lead to conflict. As Bourdieu writes, 'The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces'.¹¹ Meanwhile, as producers vie for position in the cultural field, audiences (and critics) align themselves either with or against this ironic sensibility at the point of consumption. In this respect, the debate encapsulated in the comments of Turan, Dargis and many other critics of this cinema can be seen as the struggle to 'transform or conserve' contentious notions of 'legitimate' artistic practices, and beyond that, 'legitimate' cultural positions.

How contentious is this particular struggle over the social and aesthetic politics of ironic art? Speaking at the 1992 Republican National Convention, rightwing ideologue Patrick Buchanan galvanized the conservative base of the party with his demarcation of a 'culture war', a battle fought (in his mind) between right-thinking Christian conservatives with absolute morals and a decadent class of elite secular humanists who believe 'universal' values to be open to debate. Buchanan's attack was but one front in the US conservative Right's ongoing battle against liberalism and its evil brain trust, academic relativism (that is, postmodernism; that is, irony). Seven years later, twenty-four-year old Yale law student Jedediah Purdy published *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*. Writing from the Left, Purdy strangely echoed Buchanan's call for more earnest belief in moral and cultural institutions. After condemning the nation's drift towards post-Kennedy, post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-Monica ironic relativism, Purdy suggests, 'One answer to this neglect is a renewed idea of public responsibility, the active preservation of things that we must hold in common or, eventually, lose altogether'.¹² By the time hijacked planes destroyed the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, it was clear that 'irony' had become an extremely charged code word masking a number of larger social, cultural and aesthetic divisions that had been stewing over the previous ten, twenty,

perhaps even thirty years. So bitter was this conflict, apparently, that many pundits exploited '9-11' as an opportunity to take another shot at the perceived decadence of an overly ironic culture. 'There's going to be a seismic change', predicted *Vanity Fair*'s Graydon Carter in the days following the disaster. 'I think it's the end of the age of irony. Things that were considered fringe and frivolous are going to disappear'.¹³

13 Carter's quotation appeared in innumerable publications following 11 September 2001 including David Beers 'Irony is dead! Long live irony!' Salon.com URL http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/irony_lives/ [25 September 2001]

Buchanan, Purdy and Carter were responding to a perceived change in the tone of US politics and popular culture during the 1980s and 1990s, a trend offensive to a variety of cultural critics across the political spectrum. Any attempt to delineate the 'sensibility' of 1990s smart cinema should begin by acknowledging that this larger panic over ironic culture seems to have been particularly important (and perhaps even confined) to the USA. In part this is a consequence of a larger national mythology that has long valued plain-speaking populism over ambiguous, clever (and thus suspicious) wordplay (personified in President George Walker Bush). In any case, struggles over what *Spy* magazine presciently described in 1989 as the 'irony epidemic' multiplied in popular discourse during the 1990s.¹⁴ Commentators quickly gravitated towards the term as a convenient label to describe a particular form of popular culture and, by extension, its audience. As David Beers writes: 'Somehow, irony has come to be a handy shorthand for moral relativism and self-absorption, for consuming all that is puerile while considering oneself too hip to be implicated in the supply and demand economics of schlock'.¹⁵

14 See Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen 'The irony epidemic', *Spy* (March 1989) p. 94

15 Beers, 'Irony is dead!'

Beyond the relatively obscure 'moral relativism' of Solondz and LaBute so despised by Turan, the 1990s also saw the more mainstream popularity on US television of *Beavis and Butt-head* (tx 1992–97), *Seinfeld* (tx 1989–99) and *The Simpsons* (tx 1989–), each a series that provoked civic custodians to bemoan a loss of 'common' cultural and moral values. Christian writer Thomas Hibbs, for example, linked the USA's love of *The Simpsons* to Nietzsche, nihilism and 'demonic anti-providence', calling the nation at the century's end a 'semiotic hell'.¹⁶ Meanwhile, programmes like *Mystery Science Theater 3000* encouraged viewers to ridicule 'bad' black-and-white science fiction films from the 1950s, while blockbusters such as *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) and *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) encouraged them to acknowledge the winking stupidity of a movie even as they watched it for the first time within their own historical moment. With distant roots in Popism, irony remained a cultural dominant in the gallery and the literary salon, while sarcasm, 'air quotes', and the knowing consumption of kitsch became increasingly popularized practices.¹⁷ Indeed, even President Bill Clinton confessed to enjoying the

16 Thomas Hibbs *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas: TX Spence Publishing Company, 1999) p. 169

17 For a discussion of irony's reign in contemporary fiction see David Foster Wallace 'E unibus pluram: television and US fiction in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1998)

programme *American Gladiators*, a camp mock-combat game show that he watched each week with his daughter Chelsea. When Clinton became the star of his own absurdist television wrestling programme during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, earnest pundits such as William Bennett (the USA's self-appointed Secretary of Morality) expressed indignation that no one (meaning ironic leftists) seemed to care about oral sex and adultery in the White House.

Who was behind this conspiracy to undermine the nation's semiotic and moral certitude? One of the most pronounced battle-lines in the war over 'irony' was generational. Often critics pinned the nation's move towards an ironic sensibility on the so-called 'Generation-X', a demographic category as unstable as the trope of irony itself. The term derives from Douglas Coupland's much discussed novel of the same name, the story of smart, highly educated men and women, born in the 1960s and 1970s, who missed out on the postwar US gravy train of unlimited economic growth and opportunity enjoyed by the baby boomers who preceded them.¹⁸ Baby boomers, so this argument went, saw the younger generation as lazy, apolitical, cynical, sarcastic and without purpose, especially when compared with their own self-perceived dynamic role in the social revolutions of the 1960s.¹⁹ Post-boomers, on the other hand, saw boomers as greedy hypocrites who had 'sold out' to the very forces they once claimed to fight, all the while lecturing Gen-X for its lack of 'commitment'.²⁰

Distrustful of the hippy past, dismayed by the yuppie present and disillusioned with a bumpy future, so the narrative goes, a bitter Gen-X retreated into ironic disengagement as a means of non-participatory coexistence with boomers and their domination of the cultural and political landscape. Coupland's novel captures this attitude best not so much in its story as in the aphoristic marginalia that run throughout the book. In one sidebar, for example, Coupland defines 'black holes': hipsters with a fascination for black clothes. 'day-glo' paintings and the Velvet Underground.²¹ We might interpret this to mean a demographic high in cultural and educational capital while low in economic capital, bemused by the fundamental stupidity of mainstream society ('day-glo' paintings), and engaged in a complicated love-hate relationship with US popular culture (championing the street amphetamine 'authenticity' of the Velvet Underground over the sleepy hippy navel-gazing of psychedelia). The fascination with black clothing – essentially the default bohemian uniform of the 1980s – can in turn be read as a refusal to signify, to strip one's sartorial markers so as not to be associated with (and later embarrassed by) the vicissitudes of fashion.²² It was a uniform that balanced a complex four-part address of countercultural distinction: 1) I am smarter than you; 2) I identify with all that is dark, deathly and serious in the world; 3) I am uninterested in, and thus do not keep up with, the frivolous trends of popular fashion; 4)

18 Douglas Coupland *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991)

19 Coupland defines this as *clique maintenance*: the need of one generation to see the generation following it as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego. *Ibid.*, p. 21

20 Baby boomers – it should be noted – are not particularly sympathetic figures in smart cinema, often taking on the role of the sanctimonious humourless hypocrites so frequently found in Gen-X literature. Trish the deluded and malicious do-gooding older sister in *Happiness*; the pompously mellow hippy sutor in *High Fidelity*; the absentee parents of *The Ice Storm*; the dogmatic feminist art teacher in *Ghost World*.

21 Coupland *Generation X*, p. 135

22 This proved a doomed strategy of course, as black clothing itself eventually became a candidate for ironic derision.

Recreational slumming: in *Ghost World*, Enid (Thora Birch) persuades Seymour (Steve Buscemi) to engage in the ironic consumption of pornography at a local adult book store.



I am desperate not to be confused with a typically idiotic and tasteless American.

Beyond his taxonomy of various Gen-X types, Coupland also captures this strange mix of pop delight and disaffection by describing forms of 'slumming' popular with this generation, modes of ironic cultural consumption where bowling, Cool Whip and platform shoes become not so much things to enjoy in their own right but as experiences in quotation marks.²³ Thus did a 'camp' sensibility – the ironic and aestheticized view of the world famously described by Susan Sontag in the early 1960s – migrate beyond its previous confines in gay subculture and the New York intelligentsia to inform an entire 'generation's' engagement of mass culture.²⁴

Ironically, this group's ironic position-taking at the point of consumption, adopted initially as a means of creating a camp space within the surrounding terrain of boomer taste, eventually redefined the evaluative hierarchies within popular culture itself. Thus the work of Abba, Ed Wood, Jr, and Margaret Keane was transformed from object of ridicule to icon of reverence and respect.²⁵ In 1991, two scruffy bohemians in *Slacker* argued the politics of Marxist alienation through the example of *Scooby Doo*, a famous children's cartoon series of the 1970s. By 2002, *Scooby Doo* was back as the star of his own multimillion-dollar summer blockbuster.

Do 'black holes' (and Gen-X) really exist? Anyone who attended college in the USA during the 1980s or 1990s would certainly say they do, particularly those who majored in the arts and humanities. In an age of proliferating multicultural identity politics, the 'Gen-X' label became a popular point of identification for an educated white middle class in search of victim status (this is not to say their historical predicament was wholly imagined, only that it should be kept in perspective).²⁶ Mobilizing irony as a tactic of disaffection, a

²³ Modes of slumming described by Coupland in *Generation X* include nutritional (p. 120), recreational (p. 113) and even historical (p. 11).

²⁴ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on camp', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001).

²⁵ For a discussion of this trend in film culture, see Jeffrey Sconce, 'Trashing the academy', *Screen* vol. 36, no. 4 (1995), pp. 371–93.

²⁶ Often cited during this period was a statistic claiming that 'Generation-X' would be the first generation in US history that could expect a lower standard of living than the previous generation. For an extended discussion of this dilemma, see David Lipsky and Alexander Abrams, *Late Bloomers: Coming of Age in Today's America: the Right Place at the Wrong Time* (New York: Random House, 1994).

certain social formation (defined perhaps more by bohemian aspirations than generational boundaries) created a culture of semiotic exile during the 1990s, reading 'against the grain' of so-called mainstream culture while cultivating a 'new voice' of cynical detachment.

As the decade wore on, then, Gen-Xer irony became not just a strategy of consumption and cohabitation but also a mode of cultural production, especially as younger talent moved into creative positions in the entertainment industry.²⁷ Many articles on the irony epidemic, for example, focused on the immense influence of the Gen-X television writers produced by the *Harvard Lampoon*, one of the nation's oldest collegiate satirical papers 'Stupidity, served with knowing intelligence, is now TV's answer to real smarts', proclaimed a writer for *Newsweek*.²⁸ Coverage of the new generation of film directors, meanwhile, often emphasized their troubled relationship with the consecrating functions of 'film school', a scene increasingly identified with the aesthetics of the movie brats and their boomer audience. Self-taught *enfant terrible* Quentin Tarantino, whose film education consisted of working in a video store, became alternately the hero or villain of this trend.²⁹

While one would not want to equate the ironic sensibility of the 1990s wholly with age, it is interesting that so many of the directors at the heart of the 'smart' cinema debate were born as late boomers or within Gen-X proper: Solondz, 1959; Hartley, 1960; Haynes, 1961; LaBute, 1961; Payne, 1961; Tarantino, 1963; P.T. Anderson, 1970; Wes Anderson, 1970. Much of the friction involved in the irony debate no doubt arose from this changing of the guard – baby boomers reluctantly relinquishing their thirty-year stranglehold on the institutions of popular (and 'artistic') culture to make way for this seemingly 'blank' generation of sarcastic slackers. Much of the debate around cinema and 'the new nihilism' embodies these tensions between 'older' and 'younger' cultural producers and critics, a friction that indicates a competition for prestige and legitimization. As Bourdieu writes of the literary field

Structurally 'young' writers, i.e. those less advanced in the process of consecration (who may be biologically almost as old as the 'old' writers they seek to oust), will refuse everything their 'elders' (in terms of legitimacy) are and do, and in particular all the indices of *social aging*, starting with the signs of consecration, internal (academies, etc.) or external (success), whereas the 'old' writers will regard the social non-existence (in terms of success and consecration) and also the 'obscurity' of their young rivals as evidence of the voluntaristic, forced character of some endeavors to overtake them.³⁰

In his attack on recent cinema's 'lust for the grim', Turan recognizes this impending shift in taste and prestige. 'Happiness

²⁷ Irony was not wholly new to mass culture in the 1990s, of course. For an account of the use of irony by advertising in the 1960s, see Thomas Frank *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁸ A good example of this coverage can be found in John Leland, 'Battle for your brain', *Newsweek*, 11 October 1993, pp. 49–52.

²⁹ Attending film school and then dropping out has long been an effective way of creating subcultural cachet (from Jim Morrison to P.T. Anderson).

³⁰ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 59.

31 Turan 'Fade to pitch black' np

32 Glenn Gaslin 'The finger' *New Times* 10 December 1998, np
URL <http://www.newtimesia.com/issues/1998-12-10/columns.html>
[10 December 1998]

33 Turan 'Fade to pitch black' np

wasn't always gauche', he complains, yearning for a time when films had the 'unfashionable temerity to have a sunnier outlook on life'. Turan continues. 'Today, pitch-black pictures . . . are becoming the only things acceptable to our culture's taste-makers . . . Granted, all films can't have pleasant endings, but if you admit to enjoying those that do, you're considered to be in the grip of a boring, unsophisticated state of mind.'³¹ Barely had the ink dried on Turan's essay but Glenn Gaslin, a 'younger' (in Bourdieu's sense) cultural critic writing for a 'younger' paper, had responded. 'So it looks like the stuffy gray crowd got a memo recently saying that all daring, original, disturbing and thought-provoking films should be vilified, mocked, and humiliated. Especially if they're from young directors.'³² The generational dance of 'position-taking' could not be more clear. Turan complains of gratuitous posturing and condescending tastemakers, Gaslin of ossified elders unable to tolerate (or even understand) new modes and themes of expression. Dividing them is the semiotic chasm of irony. On the one side is an emerging 'structure of feeling' that sees everything, from *Scooby Doo* to paedophilia, in giant quotation marks; on the other a structure of feeling (dominant?, residual?) that still looks for art to equal sincerity, positivity, commitment, action and responsibility. 'The serious part of our culture is in the process of abandoning positive films to cliché-addicted idiots', concludes Turan, 'to giving audiences the horrific choice of getting things dark or getting them dumb.'³³

Smart cinema might thus be described as dark comedy and disturbing drama born of ironic distance; all that is not positive and 'dumb'. Of course, this still seems a rather broad description of a cinematic sensibility. Can Solondz, LaBute, Hartley, Wes Anderson, P.T. Anderson, Tarantino, Payne and others really be said to share an aesthetic or school of filmmaking? Similarly, while *Slacker* and *Ghost World* each showcase life on irony's bohemian fringe, can they really be said to capture a shared sensibility? As with any group of directors or writers working within a set of period filmmaking practices, American smart cinema should be seen as a shared set of stylistic, narrative and thematic elements deployed in differing configurations by individual films. In this respect I think it fair to say that these films do frequently trade in a number of shared elements, including 1) the cultivation of 'blank' style and incongruous narration; 2) a fascination with 'synchronicity' as a principle of narrative organization; 3) a related thematic interest in random fate, 4) a focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; 5) a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity. These elements do not necessarily appear in all of the films at the core of the irony/nihilism debates, but they do circulate with enough frequency

34 This overview leaves aside the mass market irony based on extended pop cult parody and self-referentiality as in *Wayne's World* (Penelope Spheeris, 1992), *Austin Powers* (Jay Roach, 1997, 1999, 2002) and *Undercover Brother* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2002).

to suggest widespread diffusion in smart cinema directors.³⁴ Nor should it be imagined that those films that *do* trade in these elements necessarily subscribe to a uniform textual politics or worldview. There is, for example, a significant difference between Solondz's treatment of a middle-class husband's suburban meltdown in *Happiness* and its treatment in that film's more palatable and institutionally honoured doppelganger, *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999).

A centrepiece of the 1990s smart film might best be termed 'blank' style. Blankness, in this context, does not refer to 'invisibility' (as frequently discussed in relation to classical Hollywood editing) but can be described as an attempt to convey a film's story, no matter how sensationalistic, disturbing or bizarre, with a sense of *dampened affect*. Of course, there is no such thing as truly blank style or narration – only a set of strategies employed to signify the *idea* of blankness. Though each is antiseptic in its own way, films such as *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996), *Happiness*, *Safe*, *The Ice Storm* and *Your Friends and Neighbors* are in fact highly stylized, their sense of authorial effacement and blank presentation achieved not through a feigned verité but through a series of stylistic choices mobilized to signify dispassion, disengagement and disinterest. Often this stylistic strategy is manifested most basically through framing and editing patterns. Surveying these films, one cannot help but be struck by the frequent (even dominant) use of long-shots, static composition and sparse cutting. Vibrant editing and camera movement, so pivotal to 1970s American art cinema, would seem to have been usurped in 1990s smart cinema by a preference for static mise-en-scene and longer shot lengths.

Haynes's *Safe* exemplifies this blank style; indeed, the film is such an exemplar as to have been nominated 'film of the decade' by the *Village Voice*, one of the nation's premier arbiters of smart taste. In telling the story of the gradual deterioration of a Southern California housewife, the film studiously avoids any definitive explanation of the source of Carol's (Julianne Moore) difficulties – she may be the physical victim of environmental allergies or an emotional victim of her suffocating existence in the San Fernando Valley. To achieve this ambiguity, Haynes refuses to privilege any one 'cause' within the narrative, while simultaneously fashioning a stylistic and narrational strategy that seems consistently remote from Carol's plight. Camera and characters for the most part remain stationary, surrounded by often 'meaningful' set decor. When editing does occur, the cuts are measured, unobtrusive and wholly subordinate to character and dialogue. At many points in the film, Haynes isolates Carol in a form of 'tableau' presentation, isolating her within static long-takes shot with straight-on, level framing. Like many other films in this style, the steady and measured series of tableaux in *Safe* imparts a



Tableau framings: in *Safe*, Todd Haynes consistently places a hapless Carol (Julianne Moore) centre-frame and alone in the midst of static mise-en-scene.

sense of impassiveness, inevitability and resignation, especially as this formal treatment gradually intertwines with the narrative and thematic concerns of the film.³⁵

As an aesthetic form of 'position-taking', such stylistic treatment is at odds with what David Bordwell has recently described as 'intensified continuity'. Arguing against often rehearsed claims that US 'post-studio' filmmaking has moved towards narrative incoherence and stylistic fragmentation, Bordwell describes the new standard in international 'mass-market' cinema as involving techniques designed to *intensify* already well-established techniques of continuity'.³⁶ While today's filmmakers cut faster, frame closer in dialogue and move the camera more frequently, argues Bordwell, such practices have not fundamentally challenged the basics of classical continuity. Bordwell also argues that such practices generally operate in films 'outside the mainstream' of mass-market production. There is one difference, however: 'The major distinguishing mark of off-Hollywood directors', notes Bordwell, 'is greater average shot length'.³⁷ Bordwell's explanation for this variation is primarily economic: 'Long takes aren't too surprising in the lower-budget sector, apart from an aesthetic commitment to centering on performances, directors who plan long takes carefully can shoot quickly and cheaply'.³⁸ No doubt the low-budget long-take is in many cases a function of budget constraints and commitment to performance. Nevertheless, I would argue there is a more deliberate aesthetic at work here, one that projects an illusion of authorial blankness and cultivates a sense of distance in the audience. While still respecting classical space and time, this strategy often *de-intensifies* continuity into a series of static tableaux. Thus, while the rest of cinema turns to the acceleration of the continuity techniques described by Bordwell as a means of intensifying character identification and plot involvement, the new smart cinema often produces tension through dividing audience and storyworld, not necessarily in some form of Brechtian distancing but more as a means of fostering a sense of clinical observation.³⁹

In terms of 'position-taking', such a stylistic pose should not be surprising. As artistically ambitious filmmakers seek to distinguish their films and signature styles from the increasingly frenetic stylistic clutter of mass-market filmmaking, the smartness of their films resides precisely in this refusal to employ conventionally rapid editing, gratuitous camera movement and the 'Hollywood' modes of engagement these techniques imply (the quick 'push-in' for emphasis, ubiquitous in American popular cinema, is not in the vocabulary of the smart film – except perhaps ironically). If the 'jump-cut' became the signature marker of 'self-conscious' style in the French new wave's cinematic revolution, the static tableau may well be the thinking man's shot of choice in the smart cinema of the 1990s.⁴⁰

Within the larger debates over a decadent culture of irony, critics

35 A possible stylistic influence here is Jim Jarmusch, especially his debut film *Stranger than Paradise* (1984). Supposedly unable to edit the film due to lack of funds, Jarmusch presented his story in a series of single-shot scenes each separated by a fade to black. Whether created by accident or design, this 'tableau' style became a celebrated part of the film's critical identity.

36 David Bordwell, 'Intensified continuity: visual style in contemporary American film', *Film Quarterly* vol. 55 no. 3 (2002), pp. 16–28.

37 Ibid., p. 21.

38 Ibid.

39 The use of disengaged symmetry in so many of these films suggests Stanley Kubrick as another stylistic influence. Kubrick, of course, was well known for his almost antiseptic, balanced approach to the frame as well as a seeming lack of interest in character as a point of engagement.

40 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: WI University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 209–11.

41 The scene in which Bill attempts to sedate his young son's sleepover friend with a drugged tuna fish sandwich is particularly complex in this regard, Solondz playing the scene for Hitchcockian humour and suspense, forces us to identify with the anxiety of the child molester



Tonal shift through ironic disjunction: in *Election*, innocuous voiceover narration and an unflattering freeze-frame of Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon) are disrupted by her high school teacher's (Mark Harelik) leering and graphic admission of underage seduction.

42 Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) engaged in a similar strategy, leaving many critics and viewers unable to decipher the film's seemingly ambiguous relation to fascism

often confuse this illusion of authorial/narrational effacement with a sense of moral indifference. At first glance, many of these films often do appear to be without perspective or, to use more conservative parlance, without morality. It is a tribute to Solondz's acute control of this tone in *Happiness* that viewers find themselves simultaneously horrified and amused (and thus numbed) as they watch Bill Maplewood (Dylan Baker) – suburbanite, psychiatrist and family man – gradually become a paedophilic rapist.⁴¹ In the end, the film chooses neither to 'understand' nor 'vilify' Bill, a blank perspective that for many is more disturbing than the discourses of either liberal therapeutics or moral vengeance one would expect in the treatment of such material. The impact of many of these films depends, in the end, on the complex formal challenge of rendering the uncomfortable and unspeakable with such acute blandness, giving these films a matter-of-fact quality that no doubt leads to their common indictment as nihilistic.

Another operative principle in blank narration, found in practitioners of irony across the ages, is the tactical use of incongruity. While some films employ a tableau style to render the extreme, unpleasant and sensationalistic in terms of world-weary disinterest (itself a form of incongruity), others create blankness through a more radical juxtaposition of mismatched (that is, ironic) form and content. The opening moments of *Election*, for example, begin with duelling voiceovers from high-school teacher Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) and his annoyingly ambitious student Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon). Images of classrooms, football fields and pep rallies – accompanied by the voices of McAllister's earnest idealism and Flick's youthful naivete – suggest the film will play as a pedestrian teen comedy, evoking in large part the well-known coming-of-age films directed by John Hughes in the 1980s. But then, almost as a non sequitur, narrator McAllister adds as an afterthought, 'Oh yes, there's one more thing you should know about Tracey Flick'. We then cut to a closeup of McAllister's fellow high-school teacher, Dave Novotny (Mark Harelik), as he excitedly says of Tracey, 'Her pussy gets so wet you wouldn't believe it'. Suddenly, the safe boundaries of a typical Hughes comedy have been punctured by this leering admission of sexual harassment and statutory rape. As a result of this sudden juxtaposition, the calculatedly banal voiceovers and opening generic cues become increasingly ironic for the rest of the film, so much so that by the film's end voiceover and image are often in direct conflict.⁴²

Whether cultivated through strategies of disengagement or disjunction, 'blank' style in and of itself does not create 'tone'. When critics attack these films as ironic, cynical, fatalistic or even nihilistic, they are responding to a tone produced by this style's application to larger narrational and thematic structures. In particular, the diagnosis of nihilistic fatalism seems closely related to larger

issues of narrative causality. Bordwell's discussion of narrative strategies in the European art film of the 1950s and 1960s is useful here as a point of comparison. As opposed to Hollywood's emphasis on linearity, character causality and a three-act structure leading towards a pronounced deadline, characters in classic art cinema, Bordwell argues, are typically without clear-cut narrative goals, wandering as passive observers through a certain social milieu in a series of seemingly unconnected episodes.⁴³ In both cases formal structure and textual politics are closely interwoven. Just as the classical Hollywood cinema posits a rational agent in control of his own destiny, 'the art film's thematic crux, its attempt to pronounce judgements upon modern life and *la condition humaine*', argues Bordwell, 'depends on its formal organization'.⁴⁴ In Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), for example, Marcello wanders through jet-set Italy in a series of disjointed episodes – some humorous, some poignant, some tragic – before ending up in a highly symbolic encounter on the beach with a dying barracuda and a little girl. The film's ending is typical of art cinema's ambiguity. Is it a symbol of youthful innocence lost? Lost for Marcello or for Italy or for both? Is *La Dolce Vita* about spiritual crisis in an increasingly materialistic postwar Europe? No definitive explanation can be determined – modernist ambiguity dictates that we consider the nature of modern life and *la condition humaine* on our own terms.

Certainly related to earlier art film strategies, smart cinema offers significant departures from this European-derived paradigm. As we might expect, historical changes in art, cinema and the culture that nurtures art cinema itself have led to a different conception of *la condition humaine* as well as the 'formal organization' and 'position-taking' one might employ to capture this elusive state of being. Perhaps the most significant change in narrative causality involves the increasing prevalence of multi-protagonist stories and episodic story structure. Although certainly not true of all contemporary smart cinema, many of these films (especially the 'dramas') do favour a rotating series of interlocking episodes, centring not on a central unifying character's dynamic action (as in classical Hollywood cinema) nor on relatively passive observations (as in previous art cinema), but rather on a series of seemingly random events befalling a loosely related set of characters.⁴⁵ This shift to ensemble protagonists and episodic structure, when coupled with 'blank' style and narration, creates a formal organization ideally suited to the more postmodern (and one might say post-boomer) *condition humaine* so central to these films. The favoured narrative structure is no longer the passive observer of an absurd world who eventually experiences some form of epiphany, but rather a range of characters subjected to increasing despair and/or humiliation captured in a rotating series of interlocking scenes in which some endure while others are crushed.⁴⁶ The operatic finale to the second act of Peter T

⁴³ Bordwell *Narration in the Fiction Film* p. 207

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ In this respect the most influential model for contemporary art narration may well come from Robert Altman and in particular Altman's move towards highly episodic multi-protagonist dramas such as *Nashville* (1975) and *A Wedding* (1978). Altman himself returned with a smart film in 1993 with *Short Cuts*.

⁴⁶ Bordwell *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 208. See also Horst Ruthrof *The Reader's Construction of Narrative* (London: Routledge 1981).

Anderson's *Magnolia* is most explicit in this regard, as characters unrelated in the diegesis join together to sing a shared crosscutting coda of their individual loneliness, suffering and alienation.

This shift from the modernist protagonist's search for meaning to the postmodern ensemble 'fucked by fate' can also be discerned in the centrality of coincidence and synchronicity as an organizing principle in contemporary smart cinema. Classical Hollywood narration, of course, most frequently sought to avoid excessive coincidence, deeming it an easy and ultimately unrealistic plot device that viewers would find suspect.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, in recent cinema, unrealistic coincidences have morphed into the new realism of synchronicity, an overarching belief in the fundamentally random and yet strangely meaningful structure of reality (even if that 'meaning' is total absurdity). For example, with its prologue of a suicidal man accidentally shot through the heart while jumping from a building, *Magnolia* begins by explicitly meditating on the role of coincidence and synchronicity in modern life. The final destruction of *Election*'s Jim McAllister derives from a seemingly inconsequential moment in the film's opening credits when he unknowingly misses the bin when throwing away a sandwich, an injustice witnessed by the school's bitter janitor. *American Beauty*'s Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) dies from a rather strange episode of homophobic synchronicity. The narrative achronology of *Pulp Fiction*, the mirrored repetition of the 'gallery scene' in *Your Friends and Neighbors* and the simultaneous global taxi rides of *Night on Earth* (Jim Jarmusch, 1991) each draw attention to the synchronicities of their characters in time and space. *Mystery Train* (Jim Jarmusch, 1989) and *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) use a tripartite structure to foreground the fates of synchronicity as a formal and thematic strategy, while *Donnie Darko* uses a time-loop strategy to ponder the synchronicity of the universe. The entire narrative design of *Slacker*, finally, foregrounds this fascination with synchronicity as its main organizing principle. The film depicts a day in Austin, Texas, through a series of episodes interconnected by the random migration of its characters, each of whom appears in an isolated episode before handing off the narrative baton to the next set of actors. The film's opening monologue, meanwhile, presents a summary of the film's formal and thematic philosophy, with director Linklater, playing a taxi passenger, wondering aloud about the alternative realities that might have ensued had he stayed at the bus station.

Bordwell notes that 'chance' already played a major role in art-cinema narration of the 1960s, leading to a 'loosening of cause and effect'. As a result, 'The art film can . . . become episodic, akin to picaresque and processional forms, or it can pattern coincidence to suggest the workings of an impersonal and unknown causality'.⁴⁸ While this logic persists in these more recent films, the move to an episodic cast rather than a lone protagonist presents a shift in

47 See David Bordwell Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson *The Classical Hollywood Cinema Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press 1985) p. 13

48 Bordwell! *Narration in the Fiction Film* p. 206

49 In many respects this mix of irony and synchronicity evokes the fiction of Kurt Vonnegut: an author who has been a perennial favourite of disaffected youth for many decades and who has no doubt been widely read by many of the filmmakers and viewers in the Gen-X marketplace. Vonnegut's brand of irony, of course, often collided the grand and the trivial in bittersweet comedies about the illusion of free will, and just as often revelled in an almost mystical veneration of coincidence and synchronicity.

emphasis from 'coincidence' to 'synchronicity'; that is, the narrative (and philosophical) investment in the 'accident' yields to a narrative (and philosophical) belief in a logic of the random.⁴⁹ Though these films can follow different trajectories (many find redemption in *Magnolia* while in *Happiness* everyone attains complete emotional annihilation), this shared structure in passive synchronicity suggests that the contemporary smart cinema protagonist has become, in many cases, even more listless than his or her European forebears. More acted upon than acting, these contemporary protagonists are often prisoners of emotional abuse, sterile environments or just fate itself – walking embodiments of that famed postmodern bumpersticker, 'Shit Happens!'. Buses crash into lakes. Jet engines fall from the sky. Children die from fallen power lines. The suspense, such that there is, comes from seeing just how much shit any one character can endure and how clever the universe (or the filmmaker) can be in meting out its interconnected twists of fate.

So far this discussion would seem to confirm condemnations of these films as 'pointlessly and simplistically grim' – characters trapped by annihilating fate and narrational strategies that seem without empathy. Does anything truly *matter* in these films or are they simply bitter exercises in nihilistic cruelty? Moving beyond the more general formal aspects of style and narrative organization, many of these films also share a number of recurrent story elements and thematic concerns. Two themes seem particularly central to 1990s smart cinema: interpersonal alienation within the white middle class (usually focused on the family) and alienation within contemporary consumer culture. While earlier modes of art cinema often explored the nebulous condition of alienation in more abstract metaphysical or philosophical terms, American smart cinema favours a limited investigation of anomie within the narrower constraints of suburban family life, urban courtship and consumer identity.

This focus on interpersonal alienation in white middle-class culture is so obvious and relentless that it warrants only a few additional comments here. To the extent that these films have an explicit political agenda, it lies in the familiar theme that repression and miscommunication make the white middle class particularly ill-suited to either relationships or marriage. So ubiquitous is this theme that it has led to a number of 'stock' shots in smart cinema: the 'awkward couple' shot (a strained couple shot in tableau form separated by blank space), the 'awkward coupling' shot (a camera placed directly over the bed recording passionless sex); and, in 'family' films, the 'awkward dining' shot (long-shots of maladjusted families trapped in their dining rooms).

More interesting than this explicit agenda of dissecting the white middle class as a crucible of emotional dysfunction, many of these

films also engage, either explicitly or at the margins, in a more subtle critique of the politics of identity within consumer culture. This interest takes many forms, from playful derision of various 'taste cultures' to more complex considerations of the links between identity and consumerism. Midway through Anderson's *Boogie Nights*, for example, pornstars Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) and Reed Rothchild (John C. Reilly) decide to try their hand at rock'n'roll, and in a prolonged scene of uncomfortable derision we watch as the two earnestly work at writing incredibly banal songs, all the time wearing the most ludicrous of 1980s rock'n'roll fashions. In Stephen Frears's US treatment of Nick Hornby's British novel *High Fidelity* (2000), meanwhile, record store owner and rock connoisseur Rob Gordon (John Cusack) is horrified to learn that his girlfriend is leaving him for a new-age baby boomer who listens to that latest facile trend, 'world music'. For Gordon, the issue of proper 'taste' is ultimately more painful than the pangs of sexual jealousy. In a mass murder fantasy in *Happiness*, psychiatrist/sniper Bill Maplewood arrives for his date with infamy wearing a pastel plaid shirt, pressed khakis and brown loafers, a less than subtle joke about the L.L. Bean-ality of evil. An early crisis point in *Safe* involves the colour of a new couch. In *Ghost World*, finally, the ever-'meta' Enid (Thora Birch) is upset when local hipsters at a 'zine store mistake her knowing quotation of a 'classic 1977 punk rock outfit' for a naive exercise in *démodé* cool.

As these examples suggest, these films assume a culture (or, more to the point, an audience) of master semioticians, hyper-aware of how and what objects (clothes, cars, colas) signify. Coupland again provides terminology to capture this Gen-X penchant for exacting consumer classification and quotation, including: *decade blending* ('In clothing, the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from previous decades to create a personal mood: Sheila = Mary Quant earrings [1960s] + cork wedgie platform shoes [1970s] + black leather jacket [1950s and 1980s]');⁵⁰ *2 + 2 = 5-ism* ('Caving in to a target marketing strategy aimed at oneself after holding out for a long period of time "Oh, all right, I'll buy your stupid cola. Now leave me alone"'),⁵¹ and musical hairsplitting ('the act of classifying music and musicians into pathologically picayune categories: "The Vienna Franks are a good example of urban white acid folk revivalism crossed with ska"').⁵² Much of the sociological literature on Gen-X, meanwhile, focuses on its resistance to traditional marketing strategies, a function, it is said, of the demographic's incredible saturation in and familiarity with the cumulative history of mass consumer culture (and advertising tactics).⁵³

In a culture where Gen-X in particular apparently has an intuitive understanding of the 'commodity fetish' and Baudrillard's 'system of objects', it is not surprising that the cinema itself should take up these questions in rather self-conscious and even didactic fashion

⁵⁰ Coupland, *Generation X* p. 15

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 85

⁵³ For a typical example of this approach see *Generation X*: marketers are exploring the psyches of the 46 million Americans between 16 and 29 *Forbes* 18 July 1994 p. 293

Three films stand out in this regard, *Being John Malkovich*, *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and *Ghost World*. While taking very different paths in terms of execution, each film wrestles quite explicitly with the 'politics' of constructing one's identity from the resources of consumer capitalism. In *Being John Malkovich*, for example, self-proclaimed avant-garde puppeteer Craig Schwartz (John Cusack) discovers a pathway into the consciousness of actor John Malkovich. Like many Gen-Xers, Schwartz begins as a bitter and disaffected 'artiste', staging transgressive Punch-and-Judy shows on the streets of New York, all the while complaining about the philistines unable to understand his work. Once he discovers the path into Malkovich's body, he and an accomplice set up a fame-tourism business, charging other 'nobodies' admission to inhabit temporarily the body of a celebrity. Whilst in Malkovich's mind, tourists experience everything from sex to dental flossing in the actor's stylish Manhattan apartment, before finding themselves unceremoniously dumped near the New Jersey turnpike. Abandoning self-determination, Schwartz finally commandeers the actor's body for good and exploits his connections both to live in Manhattan and bring his puppeteering to the masses. Fame, style and comfort, ultimately, are more important than talent or authentic self.

In a much more earnest treatment of these issues, *Fight Club's* Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) tells his followers to abandon the misguided dreams of mass-cult fame that have mystified their lives. The story of a man's dissociative breakdown from the demands of habitus conflict, *Fight Club* reminds us (*à la* Bourdieu) that IKEA signifies more than inexpensive functionality in home furnishings, emblemizing as it does an entire structure of class identity, desire and social mobility. Less explicit but no less interesting in this regard is *Ghost World*. Sisters in sarcasm Enid and Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson) spend their days visiting ironic scorn on the insipid strip-mall culture that surrounds them. Once Enid meets Seymour (Steve Buscemi), a lowly fried-chicken franchise manager and jazz fanatic who somehow exists beneath the radar of contemporary pop culture, the film becomes a rather sentimental coming-of-age story about how smart people must struggle to survive in a stupid world. While *Fight Club* ends apocalyptically with the opening salvo in a war on consumer capitalism, *Ghost World* ends in pathos by considering the more personal toll the 'sensitive' must suffer in a world of mainstream crap. Financially and emotionally ruined, Seymour must at the film's end confront the ultimate Gen-X nightmare: he has to move back in with his mother.

Although Craig Schwartz's retreat into a celebrity's head or Seymour's defeated retreat into his mother's home may not seem like profound political statements, they do speak to a certain political moment (and audience) that seems to elude many critics of irony and/or the new nihilism. Unfortunately, as the code word 'irony'

Smart people in a stupid world
 – past and future. While in
Ghost World Seymour's
 eccentric relation to the
 mainstream has doomed him to
 exile and failure, Enid
 eventually leaves town in hope
 of a more dynamic future.



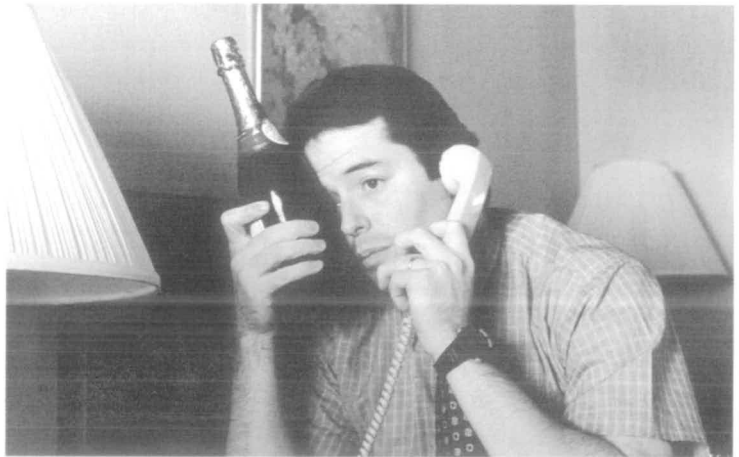
⁵⁴ An excellent critique of this construction can be found in Benjamin Anastas, 'Irony scare how did a literary device become a public enemy?', *The New Republic Online*. URL: <http://www.thenewrepublic.com/online/anastas051801> [3 August 2001]

⁵⁵ Dargis, 'Whatever', np

took shape in the 1990s (describing much more than these films, obviously), it came to be defined in opposition to 'honesty' and as synonymous with 'apathy'.⁵⁴ In the shadow of such an equation, the complexities made possible by irony were often lost in the effort to interpret them through 'non-ironic' paradigms. For example, in her essay on the new nihilism, Dargis asks the following question of cinematic ethics: 'Is Michael Madson slicing off a guy's ear in *Reservoir Dogs*, and jolting us into a state of shock, honestly more offensive, more immoral than, say, Bruce Willis chipping golf balls at a Greenpeace boat in *Armageddon*, a scene played for laughs?'⁵⁵ As good leftists, our sympathies are clearly meant to be with Greenpeace and against the evil Bay/Willis machine. Still, an audience well-trained in irony could see this as a joke at the expense of Willis as much as of Greenpeace (playing as it does on his already well-established persona as Republican action hero). More to the point, Dargis ignores the substantial population out there that might be profoundly invested in the environment and yet nonetheless find the ongoing public relations blunders of Greenpeace absolutely and incontrovertibly hilarious. Many would argue that saving the environment, at this point in history, is much better served by a semiotic war of position than by a hippy fantasy of armed struggle with working-class refinery employees.

I am certainly not arguing that *Armageddon* is at the heart of the new smart cinema. What I am suggesting is that the anti-irony crowd often confuses the 'apolitical' with politics conducted on a new terrain. Frequently dismissed as apolitical and even amoral, the new smart cinema might be better seen as a transition rather than an abnegation of political cinema. Beyond the rather tiresome portraits

of suburban dysfunction lies a more interesting impatience with semiotic naivete and, with it, either direct or indirect meditations on the workings of habitus and identity. From the perspective of traditional leftist politics, smart cinema seems to advocate irresponsible resignation to the horrors of life under advanced capitalism and an attendant disregard for the traditional villains of racism, sexism and class division. For the Right, these films seem to advance an irresponsible world view where truth and morality are no longer of concern. From within the prism of irony, however, many of these films suggest the futility of pure politics or absolute morality, concentrating instead on the prison-house of habitus and the politics of postmodern paralysis. As the fixation on quotation, distance and consumer taste suggests, one thing this sensibility cannot abide is an inability to understand how one's tastes, gestures and actions 'read' in the larger cultural field. How does one act in a world where all is



A new generational divide? In *Election*, Jim McAllister's (Matthew Broderick) Gen-X life of already diminished expectations is destroyed by his encounter with the unrestrained, soulless and wholly earnest political ambitions of the Millennial Generation's Tracy Flick.

gesture? How does one tell stories in a world where all aesthetic and political strategies are ultimately tired and predictable? Why would one expose oneself to the ridicule of being caught in a series of modernist cinematic clichés? How can one hope to critique ‘modes of production’ when even the role of ‘Marxist critic’ is now merely an identity chosen at the point of consumption? How is a person to survive when he occupies a marketing niche that sincerely enjoys a four-dollar cup of coffee at Starbucks and yet chokes with self-loathing upon hearing himself ordering a ‘skinny de-caff iced double chai latte’?

As a gesture, irony (whatever that term might mean at this particular point in these debates) is not a passive retreat from politics but a semiotic intervention within politics. Irony is not an essentialized state of (apathetic) being, but a tool to be utilized towards any number of objectives. In its refusal of conventional terms of debate, irony can be a brutally honest rhetorical strategy. Jonathan Swift’s essay ‘A modest proposal’ could, after all, reach certain political truths about poverty in his own historical moment in a more compelling manner than other forms of ‘earnest’ speech. Similarly, the smirking irony of smart cinema may be able to tell us more about the more desperate aspects of our own cultural moment than condescending didacticism. Irony, in other words, should not be seen as a disengagement from belief, politics and commitment, rather, it is a strategic disengagement from a certain terrain of belief, politics and commitment. More precisely, it is a retreat from the moral map of the social formation that so often sits in judgement of such irony. When such irony reaches the point of nihilism, we should remember that nihilism itself is not so much a belief in *nothing* as a refusal to believe in someone else’s *something*. Or, as a nameless bohemian in Linklater’s *Slacker* puts it, ‘Withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy’.

Timespaces in spectacular cinema: crossing the great divide of spectacle versus narrative

AYLISH WOOD

Do digital effects add anything more than detail to the workings of narrative in contemporary Hollywood films? The answer to this question is, of course, that it depends on the particular ways in which digital effects are used in the generation of a narrative. Although digital effects can be found in many kinds of films, and frequently pass unnoticed when used simply to tidy the image, critical responses have revolved around action and/or science fiction films, reflecting the extent to which these kinds of films have driven the early digital work in live-action films. The films most often cited to illustrate the progression of digital effects – *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), *The Abyss* (James Cameron, 1989), *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991) and *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1992) – all belong within these genres. Furthermore, the generic conventions of action and science fiction film, such as massive explosions, fantastical worlds and events, allow for and often demand that all of the available special-effects technology be put to use. Since this often involves the creation of extraordinary images, whether landscapes, morphing figures, or strange and wonderful creatures, the focus of discussion of such films has been on the contribution of digital effects to spectacle.

‘Digital effects’ is, however, a vague term, as it covers a range of possibilities that include computer-assisted or computer-generated effects. While films such as *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) and *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001) are wholly

computer-generated, the majority of live-action films I discuss in this essay combine either computer-assisted or generated images with those produced with optical processes. Examples of computer-assisted include the complex combinations of colour and black and white in *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998), or the digital compositing in the closing scene of *Die Hard 2* (Renny Harlin, 1990). Examples of computer-generated include the ghost effects in *Ghostbusters II* (Ivan Reitman, 1989) or the bus in *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan, 1997). Despite these differences I continue to use the term 'digital effects', as frequently the images combine both assisted and generated effects. Although spectacle is nothing new to cinema, and was in many ways the foundation of early cinema, it can be argued that advances in digital effects extend the possibilities of an already existing expertise. In *Industrial Light and Magic*, Mark Cotta Vaz comments:

In the post-*Jurassic Park* era, computer technology has provided filmmakers with the ability to create wholly unique characters or digitally manipulate composite elements with a freedom not possible with the old photochemical means. As such, the new digital tools provide a corollary freedom for art directors, who are dreaming up the dynamics and visual look of a shot.¹

1 Mark Cotta Vaz *Industrial Light and Magic: Into the Digital Realm* (London: Virgin Books, 1996) pp 28–30

This quotation concludes with the proposition that digital effects provide a freedom in the dynamics of the shot, an idea I shall use as the focus for this essay.

In this regard, the key aspect in the dynamic of a shot is the relationship between time and space. I am interested in the ways in which digital effects have the potential to introduce a spatial progression to narrative. By this I mean that digital effects produce spaces with the ability to transform, or which have a temporal quality, thus adding an extra dimension to the narrative progression. This contrasts with a number of existing analyses of spectacular cinema, where two distinct positions emerge in relation to time, space and narrative. The first position suggests that spectacle interrupts the *flow* of narrative, and the second that it enhances the *effect* of narrative. Andrew Darley represents the first position:

If, ultimately, the spectacular aspect has always been viewed as subordinate to and in a sense subject to the control of a repressive narrative logic, this is precisely because *spectacle is*, in many respects, the *antithesis of narrative*. Spectacle effectively *halts* motivated movement. In its purer state it exists for itself, consisting of images whose main drive is to dazzle and stimulate the eye (and by extension the other senses).²

2 Andrew Darley *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (London: Routledge, 2000) p 104. Emphasis mine.

The view that spectacle interrupts narrative progression both reveals and relies on an opposition between time and space, an opposition that can also be found in more general ideas about visual narrative:

space is perceived as an arena in which narrative progresses, the place where events occur. Its function is to support the progression of events that exist in time, especially through an emphasis on characters, their motivations and their actions. Discussing space, Richard Maltby states: 'In a movie designed for a single viewing, the representation of space must be both comprehensible and significant. It must provide the audience with a sense of the relation between characters, and between events unfolding in the fiction.'³ A similar position is found in *The Film Studies Dictionary*: 'space in cinema is organised both to convince us of credibility of the world represented . . . and to suggest meaning, usually dramatic meaning, by the way characters are placed in relation to both setting and each other.'⁴ In this view, then, space serves to provide cohesion, and to give credibility to both characters and events.

Spectacle is often understood as a particular kind of extended spatial dimension. Frequently referred to as depthless, or as having an excess of surface, spectacle is more image-full than mise-en-scene as it accumulates ever more details. This property is enhanced through digital effects because they can be used to lengthen the screentime during which spectacular elements can be seen, or lengthen the time that spectacular elements remain convincing before drawing attention to themselves as illusions. Think of the difference between the screentime spent on the detail of the RMS Titanic in *A Night to Remember* (Roy Baker, 1958) and *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997). Although in their day the models and optical effects used in *A Night to Remember* were considered very good, and served the purpose of the film very well, those in *Titanic* provide an added element to the film. The special effects supply an authentic air, as the digital rendering of the vast ship creates the site for the various narrative events that will unfold. But the digital ship can equally be viewed as state-of-the-art special effects. These effects operate as another *dimension* of the narrative of *Titanic*, the dimension that places a particular emphasis on the story of the fall of this technological giant. It is this potential for seeing an additional narrative dimension that is often overlooked when the extended screentime of spectacular elements (digital or otherwise) leads commentators to argue that spectacle interrupts narrative. Vivian Sobchack encapsulates this critical tendency when noting the suggestion that special effects 'tend to diffuse the film's temporal force, and occasionally . . . its narrative coherence'.⁵ Instead of providing coherence and unity in the narrative, the exaggerated spaces of spectacle make no obvious contribution to the progression of the narrative, as they seem only to draw attention to themselves as surface, an excess that distracts from temporal flow.

Although the idea that space contributes to the unity of narrative also underlies the second position on the relationship between time, space and narrative, the argument here is not about the interruption

3 Richard Maltby with Ian Craven
Hollywood Cinema: an Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1995), p. 193

4 Steve Blandford, Barry Keith Grant and Jim Hillier, *The Film Studies Dictionary* (London: Edward Arnold 2001) p. 220

5 Although she does not use the term, Vivian Sobchack is here discussing what many other commentators refer to as spectacle. Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: the American Science Fiction Film* second edition (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1987) p. 262

of narrative flow. Warren Buckland, for instance, draws on the convention of spatial unity in his discussion of spectacular cinema, but does so in a way that contrasts directly with the view of spectacle as a waning of narrative. In his discussion of *Jurassic Park*, Buckland suggests that digital cinema 'continues the practices of realism and illusionism', but argues that the effects enhance rather than detract from the possibilities of spatial unity.⁶ Essentially, digital effects intensify the verisimilitude of an imagined world, and spectacle is realigned with unity rather than excess. Geoff King also opposes the view that digital effects have diminished the place of narrative, but the basis of his argument is distinct from that of Buckland. Rather than suggest that digital effects enhance the unity of filmic space, King questions the homogeneity of such spaces. Instead of seeing texts as unified, he argues that they are (and to different degrees always have been) heterogeneous. Within this view, the two components of spectacle and narrative operate with, rather than against, each other. Drawing on Miriam Hansen's suggestion that contemporary special effects films are similar in impact to a cinema of attractions,⁷ King states 'If narrative offers order and coherence, moments of spectacle may offer an alternative, the illusion of a more direct emotional and experiential impact'.⁸ Contemporary spectacular cinema, then, combines spectacular elements with narrative elements and integrates them within the experience of the film.

Despite their different approaches to spectacle in special-effects films, the views outlined above nonetheless all sustain an opposition between time and space. Whether they suggest that spectacle provides cohesion, interrupts the narrative or acts as an integrated, if distinct, element of a film, these arguments reaffirm the separation of the spatial and the temporal. This separation is also embedded in the idea that narrative progression is primarily achieved through movement in time. As events within a plot organize into a thread, or as causation leads to action, there is movement in time, change occurs, and narrative goes onwards. But space, and by extension spectacle, remains a subordinate element in the generation of meaning because it is seemingly there only to support and unify, to give rise to the place in which the changing events occur. This position denies space a temporal dimension. Digital effects, however, most specifically when they extend the duration of spectacle or give extended movement to spatial elements, introduce a temporal component to spaces. For instance, in *Twister* (Jan De Bont, 1996) the images of the tornadoes are created through detailed computer-generated graphics, full of swirling movement and power as the storm races destructively across different tracts of land. The spectacularity of these images is in no doubt, but having named them as spectacle it seems absurd to then say they refer only to themselves and so contribute nothing to narrative. One of the points

6 Warren Buckland, *Between science fact and science fiction* (Screen vol 40 no 2 (1999) pp 177–92, 187).

7 Miriam Hansen, 'Early cinema: late cinema: transformations of the public sphere', in Linda Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), pp 134–52.

8 Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: IB Tauris, 2001), p 36.

of *Twister* is the power of these forces of nature, and the digital effects generate that element of the narrative. This occurs not only through the audiovisual details of the tornadoes, but also through the time that they remain onscreen. In *Twister*, the space of the tornado is not used to create a place for the story about the central characters, and as the tornado's onscreen temporality is extended, an additional dimension of the narrative is introduced.

A way of beginning to think about such temporal dimensions of space is to mobilize the term 'timespace'. A related term, 'space-time', is already in use in modern physics where it indicates a revolution in the understanding of the relationship between time and space, which occurred in the early years of the twentieth century through Einstein's theory of relativity.⁹ This theory broke with the classical view that time and space are absolute or wholly separate and instead introduced the idea that they are relative. But how is this concept useful when thinking about spectacular cinema? The usefulness lies in keeping in place the idea of the relative relationship between time and space, and how they can both make contributions to the progression of a narrative. As a combination of the two words 'time' and 'space', timespace avoids reiterating the opposition between them but also indicates that space has a temporal component. Indeed, the recently published collection of essays, *Timespace Geographies of Temporality*, uses the term specifically to indicate this relationship between time and space within human geography.¹⁰

Following this formulation, space is understood to operate in two connected ways. It acts as a space when contributing to the mise-en-scene and the integrity of the image, but it can also have a temporal dimension and so exist as a timespace. And if narrative by definition occurs through progression in time, then temporalized space can also make a temporal contribution. However, the degree to which this is evident varies from film to film. Whilst digital effects are central to the construction of some images in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), they contrast with those of the tornadoes in *Twister*. At the end of *Fight Club* complex digital effects are used to generate the exploding tower blocks that form the finale of Project Mayhem. Here, the digital images serve less to extend the time in which a spectacular element appears onscreen than to create the illusion of reality. They operate to produce a space as conventionally understood rather than to produce a timespace.

Two positions underlie this distinction between digital images which extend the temporality of special-effects spaces and those which secure the illusion of reality. The first is concerned with how digital effects introduce a dynamism, and hence temporality, to spatial elements; the second is concerned with how this dynamism has the potential to institute an additional element in the relationship between the mobile agents of the narrative and the spatial elements.

⁹ See for instance Brian Greene *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (London: Vintage 2000).

¹⁰ Jon May and Nigel Thrift, *Timespace Geographies of Temporality* (London: Routledge 2001).

The ability to create dynamic spatial elements with a temporal quality through digital effects is most obvious in images where normally inanimate spaces literally become mobile. This is a device frequently found in fantastical films where portals open into other dimensions, as in *Stargate* (Roland Emmerich, 1994) and *The Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, 1993), or where magic is used to re-order a wall into a door as in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001). Another device is the reconfiguration of usually static objects into active and moving elements, an effect found in horror films such as the remake of *The Haunting* (Jan De Bont, 1999). Here curtains and walls become animated elements within the narrative as they participate in Hill House's communications with Nell. Other examples of this dynamizing use of digital effects include the stained-glass figure that 'comes alive' in *Young Sherlock Holmes* (Barry Levinson, 1985), the pseudopod in *The Abyss*, and the sandstorms of *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999). But, as in the case of *Fight Club*, not all digital effects provide a dynamic aspect to the spatial elements of the image. Digital buildings in many films are non-dynamic in the sense that they often act only as the extended backdrop to the action of the human characters, as in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001) and *AI Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001). Similarly, the computer-generated planes of *Empire of the Sun* (Steven Spielberg, 1987) flash across the screen to provide the detail of the bombing raids.

Dynamic and non-dynamic digital effects provide two possible categories of timespace. In one category (non-dynamic) the temporal aspect of the spatial elements is relatively weak. The digital effects can be used to evoke detailed images, but they remain primarily in the background, creating the fictional reality for the plot. In the second category (dynamic), the temporal quality of the spatial elements is stronger as the digital effects dynamize the spaces of the storyworld. In all of the films discussed here, this dynamism is tied into the generation of a distinct narrative, as the dynamic elements are embedded in a narrative that emerges through a progression across time and space. Although tied to a narrative progression, the dynamism of timespace, however, does have consequences for thinking about the relationship between progression and character-based events. In mainstream films, characters are accepted as a key frame of reference, whether in terms of representation, as foci for various kinds of identification, or as agents to carry the plot forward. The narrative revolves around events that are caused by individuals of some kind, and while these are most often human they can equally be animals, robotic machines, aliens, and so forth. Whatever their apparent nature, a feature common to these characters is that they act as agents with an effect, to lesser and greater degrees, on the flow of events.

11 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1 the Movement-Image* (London: The Athlone Press 1992)

12 Ibid p 141

Gilles Deleuze uses this idea in his definition of one of the three aspects of the movement-image, the action-image.¹¹ According to Deleuze the action-image is the relation between a character and the situation in which they find themselves, where situation is defined by surroundings, other characters and ongoing activities. The emphasis, however, remains on the action of the character: 'The character reacts in his [sic] turn (action properly speaking) so as to respond to the situation, to modify the milieu, or his relation with the milieu, with the situation, with other characters'.¹² In other words, the characters are not only agents that affect the narrative, they are also mobile agents that ensure the flow of the narrative, and frequently are literally mobile themselves. It follows from this emphasis on characters that elements of the storyworld unable to act or react are not seen as contributing to a movement through narrative, and therefore they are aligned, implicitly or explicitly, with space. If such elements are, however, made to act (though not *react*, as they are not necessarily animate), or move within the space, then they too can have the effect of modifying the situation, and as such can operate as mobile agents of the narrative. I am not suggesting that such elements are in any sense the equivalent of characters, only that characters are not the only means through which situations can be modified. To return to *Twister*, the tornadoes are not the backdrop for the romantic troubles of the central protagonists, instead, the tornadoes act as another dimension of the narrative. They are mobile agents in which the environment of the film is modified, and in this case the modification is particularly dramatic. A consequence of this argument is that the narrative of a film such as *Twister* works through competing elements – those of the character-based romance, and those of the tornado. To clarify this argument, it is useful to make a comparison with some non-digital special effects in earlier films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963).

A central element of *The Birds* is the birds' attack on the human inhabitants of Bodega Bay. Convincing images of these attacks were produced using actors and trained live birds in combination with rear projection, models and animation, which were integrated using optical processes. Looking at *The Birds* in terms of special effects and narrative elements, the birds operate as active elements within the narrative. Although without clear motivation, they represent the threat within the film. In this sense, like the tornadoes of *Twister*, they act as mobile agents within the film that are effectively created by the special effects available at the time. But the distinction between *The Birds* and *Twister* is the kind of mobile agent that is given dynamism within the narrative. In *The Birds* the objects are in themselves animate, and the role of the effects is to make them seem realistic, within the context of the plot. This kind of special-effects work is found throughout the history of cinema. From such figures as

Georges Méliès, Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen to current experts in three-dimensional computer animation and animatronics, there has been a tradition of bringing creatures to life, whether realistic as in *The Birds*, or fantastical as in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963). Digital effects, in combination with animatronics and modelling, continue this tradition.

By contrast, in *Twister* the digital effects of the tornado extend the possibilities for recreating the natural phenomenon onscreen. To explain this further, a comparison can be made with *The Wizard of Oz*. Since the tornado in *The Wizard of Oz* causes the event which knocks Dorothy unconscious, it could be argued that it acts as a mobile agent within the narrative. In this case innovative special effects were used very effectively to create distance shots of the tornado – a thirty-foot muslin funnel suspended from a gantry was moved across the set in conjunction with a smoke machine which produced the 'sand' clouds at its base. The closer images of the tornado were produced using a different device. When Dorothy looks out of a window, the image visible to the audience is of a separate series of projected figures – a cow, Miss Gulch, a man on his bicycle – apparently caught up in the swirling effects of wind and sand. Again, it could be argued that these images of the tornado compete with those of Dorothy, who is simply sitting and watching. But within the film overall the tornado is only a minor element, as *The Wizard of Oz* is really about the journeys of self-discovery of the four central characters. The potential for the special effects to form a competing element within the narrative is, then, also dependent on the extensiveness of their plot function. In *Twister* the plot is concerned with a group of scientists who chase tornadoes. And a part of the narrative is created through the digital effects that allow the twisters to appear and reappear, showcasing both the possibilities of special effects and also the tornadoes' strange behaviour as they divide into 'sisters', leap and wreak devastation across the countryside. The tornadoes do not appear briefly as a plot device to allow something else to happen; instead, they form an additional narrative dimension that competes with that of the human figures.

Digital effects therefore have the potential to introduce a dynamism to narrative spaces, one which can be addressed by a reconfiguration of ideas about the relationship between time and space in the cinema through the idea of timespace. There are two consequences to this use of timespace. The first is that dynamic digital effects introduce an additional element to the narrative – a different kind of mobile agent. This in turn leads to the second idea that in spectacular cinema using dynamic digital effects the images are built around competing elements. In the remainder of this essay I expand on these ideas through a discussion of three recent films, each of which has been noted for its use of digital effects: *Gladiator*

(Ridley Scott, 2000), *The Perfect Storm* (Wolfgang Peterson, 2000) and *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999). All make extensive use of digital images, but do so in quite distinct ways, each producing a different kind of timespace: a relatively non-dynamic space and a more dynamic timespace

Gladiator, with digital work by Mill Film, won five Oscars, including those for Best Effects (Visual Effects), Best Sound, Best Music (Original Score) and Best Art Direction (Set Decoration). The construction of the storyworld of *Gladiator* depends on digital and non computer-assisted effects, and on the film's release much was made of the apparent realism of the imagery. Much of the visual impact of *Gladiator* is produced by the detailed design of the architecture of the set, including the furnishings and the statuary. The costumes – including the ordinary clothing of the various strata of the Roman world, army uniforms and those for gladiatorial combat – also contribute to the recreation of the imagined past of the Roman Empire. This imagined past is based on artefacts from the Roman period, and paintings by the nineteenth-century artist Jean Leon Gerome, but it also echoes the grand scale of the Hollywood epics of the 1950s and 1960s.¹³ The scale of the crowds in the chariot race scenes in the Circus Maximus of both versions of *Ben-Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925, William Wyler and Andrew Marton, 1959) and the battle sequence between the slaves and the Romans in *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) are echoed in *Gladiator*, as is the scale and splendour of the city of Rome. The technique of using optical effects to produce the upper layers of people in the Circus Maximus in *Ben-Hur* is a device reused, though technologically updated to a digital effect, in the more recent film.

Taken together, these components – the scale of the scenes, the set design, the use of costume and the music – create the setting in which the central characters of the film operate. The uses of digital effects in *Gladiator* are in keeping with the contribution of non computer-assisted effects: that is, they serve primarily to support the actions of the human characters. The movements through the spaces, whether digitally constructed or not, remain allied to the movements and actions of the characters. Rather than dynamizing the spaces of the narrative, the digital effects are primarily used in the 'classical' sense – to enhance the illusion of a carefully constructed reality. For instance, various special effects are put to use, including animatronic lions in the arena, and layers of digitally crafted crowds in the upper levels of the Coliseum, as well as some of the more extended views of Rome. But despite the detail of this digitally constructed Rome, it functions only to support and complement the various activities of the human characters – the machinations of Commodus, Lucilla and the Senate along with the various heroic antics of the Gladiator Maximus. As a tale of tragedy and revenge, the spectacle in *Gladiator* is in keeping with the epic films of the

13 Details of the making of *Gladiator* can be found in Ridley Scott and Walter Parkers *Gladiator: the Making of the Ridley Scott Epic* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

1950s and 1960s, with a particular emphasis on scale – the size of the crowds whose mass favour can be won or lost, the vast expanse of the city and the massive structure of the gladiatorial arena, the Coliseum. But this emphasis on scale does not often provide another dimension of space, a space dynamized into a timespace. The unveiling of the Coliseum is one of the few moments within *Gladiator* when the human action elements of the narrative give way to a different timespace. As Maximus, Hagan and Juba stand looking upwards, there is a tracking movement towards them, a track that lengthens the pause between shot and countershot, and so provides a degree of suspense. But when the characters' view of the Coliseum is shared with the audience, its spectacular entrance is quickly upstaged by Proximo as he moves centre-frame. Thus, although the digital Coliseum is meant to be an arresting sight, it takes up little screentime as a spectacular element in itself. Any potential shift, even a very brief one, from a space that emphasizes the human characters to one that does not, is stalled. Instead, Maximus's position as the central and tragic figure of the narrative is ensured as the organization of space generated through digital and non-digital filmmaking places him as the primary focus of attention.

In contrast to *Gladiator*, *The Perfect Storm* combines digital images with filmed action to generate a narrative with different sets of dynamic space or timespaces. *The Perfect Storm* is a dramatization of an extraordinary storm that occurred in 1990 and the death of a group of fishermen who crewed the Andrea-Gail, a swordboat that was unable to outrun it. In some instances the digital images in the film, created by Industrial Light and Magic, function in a similar way to those of *Gladiator* – providing a coherent space for the place where events occur, the narrative location. A number of digital images of waves provide a background to scenes that were filmed on a set. For example, the on-boat sequences were filmed in a water tank in which a full-size model of the Andrea-Gail was mounted on gimbals that provided the motion, the water effects were generated using wave machines, hoses and so on. The skill of the digital work in such scenes is to work the two kinds of images seamlessly together and maintain the illusion of the storyworld. But *The Perfect Storm* can be distinguished from *Gladiator* by the way in which dynamic spaces are also created around the digital images of the storm. These timespaces are created when the images of the storm become more central to the narrative. This occurs as the images of the storm shift from simply providing a coherent location to become instead a competing narrative element about the power of the storm itself. This shift occurs gradually within the film since, as it gathers together various narrative elements, it follows the evolution of the storm. These narrative elements are constituted by a series of events whose only connection to each other is their interaction with

the storm. Rather than using a linear chain of events, such as the story of Maximus's betrayal and subsequent revenge in *Gladiator*, the progression of the story is established through the transitions between these sets of events as they build up a sense of the storm. Take, for instance, the 'gathering storm' section of *The Perfect Storm* the sequence that follows on from the prologue and sets up the story of the Andrea-Gail returning to sea. The gathering storm section emerges across different locations – the Andrea-Gail, and the seas off Bermuda and Sable Island. As the narrative progresses and the images cut between the locations, several effects occur. Firstly, a relationship is established between the different and distant locations, as it is already known that the Andrea-Gail is headed into the storm area. The portent of this journey is evident in the different visual rhythms of the locations. About a third of the way into the film there is a transition between the calm and stormy waters of two separate locations. The images of calm, relatively long shots with smooth movements are counterposed with angle-framed shots of water pounding on a yacht, along with rapid cuts between the different figures. The contrast between these two very distinct rhythms inserts a sense of impending crisis into the narrative, as this is the storm, not yet near its full power, which will destroy the calm of the fishermen.

The establishment of a relationship between the different locations is, however, only one effect of the presence of the different spaces. Their presence also adds competing elements to the narrative, competing in the sense that a viewer's attention is potentially distributed between the sets of events, which they will have to organize for themselves to make sense of the progression. The two main elements of the gathering storm sequence revolve around the Andrea-Gail, and a more disjointed network that connects to form a second element around the three fronts of the storm. The rhythm of the Andrea-Gail is established around the work patterns of the fishermen as they go through their activities of waking, eating, sleeping and arguing with each other. The rhythms of the men working, instead of being associated with times of day, are anchored to the routines of fishing – baiting the lines and hauling in the catch. The rhythm of the work on the Andrea-Gail appears self-contained as it is confined to the relatively enclosed area of the vessel – the crew is either inside the small cabin or within the perimeter of the deck. In contrast, the storm establishes another rhythm as the three initially separate weather fronts move towards one another.

The effects of these three fronts are demonstrated by three narrative dimensions that are established in the satellite image sequences, the yacht rescue and the tankers crashing through waves. Whilst each of these dimensions is separate, especially in terms of geographic location, the three are linked through the structuring device of the storm. Unlike *Gladiator*, in which Maximus is the

figure who pulls the elements into a coherent whole, here the storm performs this function. And as it does so, the images of the sea begin to shift from serving as background to being a more active element within the narrative, from forming a location to becoming a timespace. For instance, in the sequences with the yacht *Mistral*, the sea is the backdrop against which the drama of the rescue takes place. When taken with the pitching of tankers in huge digital waves and the satellite images of swirling cloud mass, the elements work to foreground the storm. Not only is it foregrounded, there is also a growing sense of its accumulating ferocity and changing status within the story. The effective rendering of stormy seas through digital techniques ensures that such images can remain onscreen without calling attention to themselves as special effects, a feature that allows them to retain the illusion of reality and contributes to their status as elements of the narrative. Just as the prolonged views of the tornadoes in *Twister* contributed to their status as elements of the narrative, so the more extended views of the sea and waves in *The Perfect Storm* contribute to the narrative about the power of the sea. Because this aspect of the narrative is organized in what might appear to be a disjointed way, it is for the viewer to gather these elements together and make sense of them amongst the other competing elements of the storyworld. The storm narrative competes for a viewer's attention that is already distributed across the story of the threat of the storm against various human characters, and also the more marginal strand of the romance.

For much of the gathering storm section of *The Perfect Storm*, the different elements, created through both digital and non computer-generated effects, serve to generate a sense of the impending catastrophe and the increasing wildness of the storm. The progression of the third section of the film is different, as rather than building up possibilities it finally demonstrates the collision of different fronts of the storm, a device which results in the digital effects constructing a timespace for the massive power of the combined fronts. Here the full force of the storm becomes clear, as the narrative elements collide in a maelstrom of images. The sequence opens with a digital dive from a satellite cloud swirl right into the eye of the storm. Its wild energy is captured in the rapid cutting between the rescue attempts (still associated with the yacht *Mistral*) and the fishermen battling against the storm, as well as within each of two spaces, where rapid cuts and angled shots heighten the effect. The images, which at times verge on the chaotic, are linked by music and dialogue which anchor them to a particular location. On the coastguard vessel, for example, there are a series of very rapid cuts from one group to another, frequently without any linking figure (beyond the storm), but the whole sequence is held together by the dialogue. The music is also important as, unlike the dialogue which operates within the confines of a particular location, it provides

cohesion across all of the scenes, even though it frequently has to compete with other sounds.

As well as the rapid cutting which conveys the power of the storm, in this third section the digital effects become visible as central components of the narrative, as the larger waves previously kept in the background take on more visual emphasis by filling the screen space, an effect that is extended in time to allow the waves to be seen. The people in the water are tiny dots on the swell of the massive waves, and the boats appear insignificant and powerless when confronted by the walls of water about to crash down around them. Once the *Andrea-Gail* has sunk, the power of the sea and nature as an elemental force is triumphant, whilst the human figure of Bobby (one of the crew) is small, insignificant and finally lost as he recedes into the distance of the shot. Through these scenes the two competing elements of *The Perfect Storm* come together in a single timespace. As the images show the waves crash over the upturned hull of the swordboat, the narrative of the power of the storm, created through huge digital waves, reaches its apex just as the storm causes the fishermen's death. The use of digital effects culminates in images of waves that not only generate a narrative about the power of a storm, but also make the storm a mobile agent that devastates the environment of the human figures.

The structure of *The Perfect Storm* leads us as viewers into the eye of the storm, but such extremities of nature are transient. The final images of the turbulent seas, with a voiceover of Bobby's dying words, give way to calm waters skimmed by a helicopter. Once more the human figures and their technology are seemingly back in control. However, this dialectic of storm and calm is not simply about the encounter between humans and nature, as it also operates within the film to reconnect all the images of life and death at sea that have run throughout it, and in particular to return to the people back on land in Gloucester. Through a series of intercuts to these people, an alternative narrative space to the timespace of the storm and the men on the *Andrea-Gail* has been kept active. The images of the growing ferocity of the storm out at sea are counterbalanced by the continuing lives of those back on land. These lives are marked by the waiting and the anxious inactivity of mothers, lovers, ex-wives, children, the boss, and men too old to be at sea. The shift from stormy to still waters also indicates a change in the film's tone. Throughout the gathering storm and storm sequences, the emphasis has been on the building power of the storm, and the digital effects have provided a timespace for it to emerge as a mobile agent within the narrative – it is the storm that changes the situations of many of the characters. In contrast, the epilogue re-emphasizes a narrative dimension that had been displaced: the dimension of mourning. This dimension was evident in the opening, pre-credit sequence of the film, which includes images of the sheer marble face of a monument

to the dead, covered with columns of names, and a statue of fishermen in a storm. In its epilogue, the film returns to the image of the names of the dead, and in doing so inserts a place for loss and remembrance

The presence of competing elements within *The Perfect Storm* makes it difficult to establish a single reading for the film. The different aspects of the storm, the images of rescue and drowning, the weather forecaster's view, that of the other fishermen and women, the timespace of the ferocious storm and the framing images of monuments each provide alternative views or experiences of the story of the storm. As a consequence of arguing that *The Perfect Storm* is constructed around these competing elements, the notion of any of these being the 'real' story of the storm becomes problematic. Each represents a different, but equally valid, version of the same event. Rather than forming a single coherent version of the storm, one that would organize its story through a unified view, there is a range of realities. This view of *The Perfect Storm* leads back to debates about narrative as a means of articulating events into an understandable configuration. One aspect of these debates has been concerned with the ways in which fiction films obscure complication and contradiction in order to establish sense and enhance the illusion of the storyworld. The use of digital effects in *The Perfect Storm* has the potential to tend towards a view of spectacular narrative that maintains, if not extends, an illusion of reality of the kind discussed by Buckland because of the convincing way in which the storms are recreated and integrated into the narrative. However, the construction of *The Perfect Storm* through competing elements leads away from that potential. The digital effects may work strongly to create an illusion of reality, but the competing elements introduce more than one reality, thus offering the viewer more than one way of recreating the story.

Like *Gladiator*, *The Matrix* is laden with Oscar-winning visual effects, in this instance created by Manex Visual Effects. And like *The Perfect Storm* these digital effects introduce dynamic spaces into the narrative of the films. On a relatively superficial level the digital effects literally dynamize objects. In the moments after Neo swallows the red pill which heralds his great adventure, the mirror at which he is looking turns to liquid. This reconfiguration of a broken mirror from fractured lines to a fluid mass does not operate simply as a gimmick, it presages Neo's journey. Neo, about to break free from the strictures of his alienated existence within the Matrix, moves into a different reality that is as yet uncertain and open to change. The capacity to dynamize spaces also introduces elements within the narrative of *The Matrix* which provide additional dimensions to the story beyond the more obvious physical actions of the human agents. The presence of these elements is evident at different levels of the narrative, and is usually mobilized around the theme of conflict.

between two competing forces, humans and machines, where the agents of this contest are humans (or machines mainly played by humans). An emphasis on human agents ensuring change is in keeping with the view that action within a narrative is based around the capacity of human figures to alter the environment of either themselves or other figures.

Morpheus, Trinity and Neo, as representatives of the resistance, and the Agents, as representatives of the machines, form the cast of characters across whom the conflict is played out. The human action-based sequences, however, are not the only dimension in which a confrontation between the opposing forces occurs, as another dimension is the articulation of the dialogue. Agent Smith, chief emissary of the machines, speaks in a distinctive voice pattern that is slower than that of the human characters, an effect most evident in the interrogation scenes involving Neo and Morpheus. In the interrogation of the latter, the content of the dialogue accentuates the conflict as Agent Smith says to his prisoner: 'The future is our world, Morpheus, the future is our time'. The sense of conflict is further played out through the spatial and temporal dimensions of the image. These dimensions provide an additional location for the conflict that operates more explicitly at the level of the human and machine figures. As the storm of *The Perfect Storm* is established by a digitally constructed timespace, in *The Matrix* digital effects produce a timespace where the spatial and temporal coordinates are disrupted according to the conflicting demands of the competing forces of the film. In *The Matrix* the story of conflict is both acted out through the characters and made manifest in the construction of the images themselves.

The question of an ability to control space and time is explicit in the activities of the characters. The storyworld of *The Matrix* consists of two apparently distinct spaces: that of the Matrix – a machine-controlled virtual environment powered by energy produced by human metabolism – and that of 'Real World' – an alternative grungy space inhabited by the Resistance. Much of the action occurs in the Matrix, and it is here that the conflict over the spatiotemporal dimensions emerges through the interruption to the machinic space by the Resistance. This interruption, very clear in the actions of the human figures, is also made visible by the play with the space and time of the images. As the progression of images is slowed, stretched and warped, a sense of shifting phases introduces a dynamic quality to the spaces of the film. And it becomes evident that some of the conflict between the humans and the machines will be at the level of the timespace. Thus, rather than the conflict being evident simply through the actions of the human actors, the manipulation of timespace through special effects introduces conflict at the level of the organization of the visual images. The sense of a timespace with a manipulable rhythm is here

not only a feature of digital effects, it is also a reality for the figures within the narrative.

The Trinity chase sequence, which occurs near the beginning of the film, introduces some of the possibilities of this manipulation of timespace. The combination of conventional filmed-action sequences with computer-generated images, wire-work with blue-screen effects, and 'bullet-time', allow Trinity to hang in the air, leap across impossibly wide spaces and reconfigure from a three-dimensional human figure into a signal on a phone line. It is not only Trinity's ability to act on the other human figures which is demonstrated here, it is her capacity to exert control over timespace. The bullet-time images give the impression that Trinity can defy gravity, but within the storyworld of the film it is her ability to distort the normal timespace of the machine world that is established. Throughout *The Matrix* bullet-time is used to demonstrate how different groups can exert control over the timespaces, as it allows filmmakers to speed up or slow down a sequence of shots, whilst keeping some elements within the same image much slower. For instance, during the rescue sequence in which Morpheus breaks free of his chains and runs across the room, the trajectory of the bullets from Agent Smith's weapon are marked in the splashes of water. Very briefly there is a disjuncture between Morpheus's movement and that of the bullets. Although Morpheus and the bullets co-exist and are moving within the same timespace dimension, the construction of the images shows one set of movements to be subordinate to the other. Morpheus is frozen at first in the background, but as the images trace the fired bullet across the room, he is repositioned in the foreground. In this sequence the conflict over control of the timespace occurs on two levels: through the interactions of the characters (Morpheus escaping the Agents), and through the timespace of the images themselves (the trajectory of Agent Smith's bullet takes precedence over the movement of Morpheus). In each of the set-piece conflicts between the Agents and the Resistance – the rooftop bullet-dodging sequence or the battle between Neo and Agent Smith in the underground – the manipulations of the rhythms of the timespace provide an additional narrative dimension to the actions of the human characters.

In this essay I have illustrated some of the ways in which a relationship between digital images and the constructions of narrative can be considered. Films such as *Gladiator* primarily use digital images to create extensive backgrounds in which the human figures can exert effects over the situations in which they find themselves. Digital effects here act to ensure an illusion of reality rather than to add anything to the narrative. In other films, however, digital images generate new dimensions of timespace within their narratives. In *The Perfect Storm*, the structure of the narrative emerges through transitions between different spaces, one of which is a digitally created dynamic timespace. The digital images generate a storm that

acts as an additional mobile agent affecting the situations of the human characters *The Matrix* is similar to *The Perfect Storm* in that its digital effects are used to create dynamic and manipulable timespaces that also create an additional dimension within the narrative.

Overall, digital effects can, but do not always, expand the already existing timespaces of narrative, and their potential to exaggerate, or give movement to, elements of the narrative previously seen as support requires a different way of thinking about the relationship between time and space. Maintaining the opposition between time and space inevitably results in separating elements into spectacular or narrative components. If the two are held together through the idea of timespace, then it is possible to think about narrative as composed of competing timespaces – one effect of which is that an image may contain multiple points of focus. The outcome is a need to rethink conventions of narrative in spectacular cinema, a cinema which exists in a continuum with other media that have multiple points of focus – computer games, comic book cartoons and multimedia installations. Instead of being the death of narrative, as some reports have prematurely suggested, digital effects are able to introduce new dimensions.

Childhood, class and memory in the *Seven Up* films

JOE MORAN

In 1964, Michael Apted worked as a researcher and assistant producer on a documentary for Granada Television called *Seven Up*¹. The programme, broadcast in May of that year, took fourteen children from diverse backgrounds: Neil and Peter from a state school in a middle-class suburb of Liverpool; Nick from a small village in the Yorkshire Dales where he was the only pupil in the schoolhouse; Sue, Lynn, Jackie and Tony from elementary schools in London's East End, Symon and Paul from a Barnardo's children's home in Middlesex, Bruce from a boarding school in Hampshire, and Andrew, Charles, John and Suzy from exclusive, fee-paying day schools in London. With the programme's director, Paul Almond, Apted talked to the children about their lives, interests and aspirations, and solicited their views on class, money, race, the opposite sex and school life. They were then brought together to be filmed on a day out in London, where they were treated to a party and a trip to the zoo, and were left to their own devices in an adventure playground.

The aim of the programme, according to the narrator Douglas Keay, was to test the Jesuit maxim, 'Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man', and to provide 'a glimpse of England in the year 2000'. Although the project was initially envisaged as a one-off, Apted has returned to it in various formats every seven years, following the children through from adolescence to middle age in five additional films: *Seven Plus Seven* (1970), *Twenty-One* (1977), *28 Up* (1984), *35 Up* (1991) and *42 Up* (1998).¹ This essay discusses these films collectively, and examines the ways

¹ All these films were also produced by Granada. The six-year gap in filming between *Seven Up*¹ and *Seven Plus Seven* is explained by the fact that the children were all born in 1956 and were thus nearly eight when the first documentary was made

in which they engage with a number of competing discourses about childhood, class and memory.

Seven Up' reflected changing public attitudes in the early 1960s and it is significant that it was screened only a few months before Labour's victory under Harold Wilson in the general election of November 1964, which ended thirteen years of Tory rule. Wilson owed his success partly to a subtle reworking and nuancing of the language of class conflict. He exploited the unpopularity of the Tory party's grouse-moor image, and presented Labour as a modernizing, meritocratic force. Wilson's vision drew on influential works such as Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956) and Michael Shanks's *The Stagnant Society a Warning* (1961), which criticized the corruptions and inefficiencies of the 'Establishment'.² Crosland's book, for example, moved away from an orthodox Marxist perspective on class and towards a Weberian notion which presented it as the product of differing levels of status, lifestyle and education, all of which affected one's 'life chances'. Crosland saw the education system in Britain as 'the most divisive, unjust, and wasteful of all the aspects of social inequality', and argued for comprehensive, non-selective schooling and the gradual integration of the public schools into the state system.³

Founded in 1955 with the Independent Television (ITV) weekday franchise for the North of England, Granada had clear sympathies with Labour's social agenda. Granada producer Tim Hewat, a native Australian frustrated with the rigidity and intricacy of the British class system, commissioned *Seven Up'* as a one-off special in the *World in Action* documentary series, which he had helped to found in January 1963. Hewat, Apted and their colleagues were all keen to use the series as a way of dealing with controversial issues and stimulating political debate. Throughout the 1960s, the programme fell foul of the Independent Television Authority for its allegedly leftwing bias in programmes about, for example, defence spending and the living conditions of black people in South Africa and Angola. Hewat made it clear that he only partly subscribed to the notion of journalistic objectivity:

One goes into some subjects with a prejudice or a belief that one wants to see borne out on the screen. Conversely, one goes into other programmes without preconceived beliefs but in a spirit of inquiry and investigation. Having made the investigation, and being satisfied that it has been done thoroughly and fairly, then I think it is the responsibility of the producer to draw conclusions from the information.⁴

The principal aim of bringing together children from 'startlingly different backgrounds' in *Seven Up'* was to show the impact of class

2 C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* second edition (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964).
Michael Shanks, *The Stagnant Society a Warning* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

3 Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* pp. 188–193.

4 Francis Wheen, *Television a History* (London: Guild Publishing, 1985) p. 80.

- 5 Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins, *Imagining Reality the Faber Book of the Documentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 249.



Neil in *Seven Up!* Images
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- 6 Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

distinctions on life chances. The programme has no explicitly articulated thesis but points to the significance of class implicitly through its narrative techniques, the most obvious of which is the suggestive intercutting of shots of the different children in their everyday lives. In this sense, the programme drew on the social tradition of earlier British documentarists such as John Grierson, while adapting this tradition to incorporate new film technologies. The introduction of lightweight 16mm film cameras and smaller, synchronous sound equipment in the late 1950s and early 1960s, along with the increasing speed of films which enabled most scenes to be filmed in natural light, allowed the documentarist to penetrate into previously unfilmable areas.⁵ These technological changes helped to create new forms of documentary-making in British Free Cinema, American Direct Cinema and French cinema verite, with an emphasis on location filming, spontaneity and intimacy rather than staged situations and didactic commentary.

Seven Up! was also partly a product of these technological changes and their transition to television. The film offers unprecedented glimpses into the daily routines of children, albeit sometimes through re-enactments. It shows Neil skipping down a suburban street in his duffel coat, and doing free movement to music in a physical education lesson; Suzy surreptitiously scratching her nose in ballet class; John, Andrew and Charles singing 'Waltzing Matilda' in Latin; and Tony acting as milk monitor and being told off for turning round in a lesson. There are impressionistic snatches of children's lives in the form of playground fights, skipping games, communal school dinners and the queue for Saturday morning pictures. In one scene, the camera even adopts Tony's-eye view as he moves across the schoolyard and into a line of pupils. The film thus attempts to use the new technological sophistication of documentary-making to examine children's culture on its own terms, in the manner of Iona and Peter Opie's influential book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, which sees the initiation rites and secret languages of the playground as expressions of a tribal culture with its own hierarchies and meanings.⁶ At the same time, these images are arranged together in order to make significant statements about the way in which young children are already the product of their class identities.

The interviews conducted with the children similarly reveal the programme's class agenda. Although there is an attempt here to see the children on their own terms – they are filmed at eye-level and, unusually for the time, are able to speak for themselves rather than have their situation interpreted by a Griersonian 'voice-of-God' narration – they are also asked leading questions about money, private schools, and 'rich' and 'poor' people. So we see Andrew discussing which newspaper is the best one for checking his shares, and Charles arguing that private education is a good idea because

7 Richard Brooks 'Seven Ups and downs' *The Observer*, 12 July 1998 review section p. 2

8 Ibid

9 Claudia Joseph, 'What happened to the *Seven Up* crew?' *The Times* 11 July 1998 p. 10
Michael Apted Introduction in Bennett Singer (ed.) *Seven Up* (London Heinemann 1998), p. ix

10 Apted Introduction p. xi

11 Brooks 'Seven Ups and downs' p. 2

otherwise 'all the poor people would come rushing in'. This is then followed by a cut to Jackie saying that all she wants is a 'nice and comfy' house, and Lynn stating with great conviction that she is 'going to work in Woolworth's'. This rather two-dimensional 'Bash Street kids and toffs' element, as one critic calls it,⁷ may result partly from the fact that the programme was hastily put together and initially not planned as part of a sequence. There was thus no attempt to provide a scientific or representative sample of the population. Apted had only three weeks to find the children and simply rang up various schools, asking teachers to recommend pupils.⁸ This meant that the group was less diverse than it might have been, several of the children, in fact, went to the same school or children's home. Apted has since expressed regret that 'the film lives a bit in the extremes of the social system' and fails to include 'more of the middle ground', and that the presence of only four girls means that the series largely skirts over the important changes in women's lives in the intervening years, particularly the juggling of families and careers.⁹

As the project has progressed, its original thesis on class has been comprehensively, if rather predictably, corroborated. While John's education and career moves inexorably from Westminster School through to Oxford, the Bar and Queen's Counsel, for example, Jackie leaves school at sixteen and by forty-two is a single mother living in a high-rise council flat, surviving on state benefits and the generosity of her ex-mother-in-law. Almost all the participants, however, are reluctant to acknowledge the role of class, and bristle at Apted's suggestions in the interviews that their lives have been either especially restricted or fortunate. At twenty-eight, Sue says that 'we all could have gone any way that we wanted to at the time within our capabilities'. At forty-two, she still insists that 'you can do anything you want, within reason', but that 'there are some areas you will never get into. . . I wouldn't be comfortable there; I would never be accepted.' The participants' responses to these questions, and the fact that the project has gradually become about other issues such as marriage, divorce, child-rearing and the death of loved ones, have led Apted and others to revise their view of the films. After *28 Up* was successful on cinema release in the USA, where Apted thought that its class agenda would be perplexing, he concluded that he 'hadn't made a political film at all', but 'a humanistic document about the real issues of life – about growing up; about coming to terms with failure, success, disappointment; about issues of family and all the things that everybody can relate to'.¹⁰ Stephen Lambert, one of *42 Up*'s producers, agrees that the programme 'is not as rigidly focused on class any more, but that's because the class system itself is not as rigid'.¹¹

This reading of the films can be placed in the wider context of what Andrew Milner calls 'the strange death of class' in political

12 Andrew Milner, *Class* (London Sage 1999) p 1

13 David Cannadine *Class in Britain* (Harmondsworth Penguin 2000), p 13

14 The detailed knowledge of London's geography officially required of its black-cab drivers

15 Cannadine *Class in Britain* pp 170 166

discourse¹² Within this revised discourse, the Thatcher revolution of the 1980s is seen as having largely removed the spectre of class conflict from British society, shifting power away from organized labour and an old-school Establishment and towards an ever-expanding middle class of individual consumers and shareholders. This belief can be seen more recently in John Major's rhetoric of a 'classless society' and Tony Blair's desire to purge the Labour Party of its 'Marxist intellectual analysis', its 'false view of class' which was 'always out of kilter with the real world'¹³ There is no doubt that the narrator's confident prediction in *Seven Up* that 'the shop steward and the executive of the year 2000 are now seven years old' seems anachronistic in its unambiguous management-workers divide. The programme did not foresee the decline of the British economy's manufacturing base, the fragmentation of the working class, the rising number of white-collar jobs and Thatcherism's destruction of union power

It is not that class becomes irrelevant in the later programmes of the series, however, but that it is seen as working itself out in complex ways. The lives of some of the working-class participants in the project, for example, have clearly become more comfortable. Tony, doing 'the knowledge'¹⁴ at twenty-one and a London cabbie by twenty-eight, appears in the later films almost as a living embodiment of the embourgeoisement thesis. He is a self-employed member of the aspirational working classes, one of the heroic figures of 1980s political discourse, and a type now wooed by Tories and Labour alike. Born and bred in the East End, by *42 Up* he has bought a large semi-detached house with his wife in Woodford Green, Essex, confessing that it has 'financially crippled me, but it's worth it'. While Tony has clearly done well for himself, it is also true that his sense of identity, and his hopes and desires for the future, are all invested in a rhetoric of conspicuous consumption which he also sees as a form of entrapment. He talks to APTED in his brand new fitted kitchen and proudly shows him the patio and the fish pond, but worries about the 'financial hole' into which he has dug himself. He and his wife Debbie now work alternate shifts in the same taxi in order to pay off their debts, which run into thousands of pounds.

The films also point consistently to the relationship between the material and the discursive in the formation of class identity. As David Cannadine points out, Britain is no less egalitarian or socially mobile than comparable western societies, but 'the British think and talk about their inequality and immobility more', because 'they have a larger repertoire of surviving vernacular models than most nations in which to describe and discuss them'. The films are uniquely placed to explore this relationship between 'social vocabularies and social identities'¹⁵ because they show that these means of articulating class difference are available to children, and can become self-

fulfilling when combined with powerful material disadvantages. In *42 Up*, a montage of shots of Symon, the boy of mixed race from a children's home, at different stages of his life suggests that he has gradually internalized these social expectations. At seven, he is hopeful about finding a good job: 'I'll just walk around and see what I can find'. At fourteen, he has already abandoned his ambition to be a movie star and now wants to be an electrical engineer because 'it's more to reality'. At twenty-one, he is working in the freezer room at Wall's sausage factory, but insists he cannot stay there for long because his 'mind would go dead'. But he is still there at twenty-eight ('better the devil you know, innit?') and by the time he is thirty-five, the factory has closed down. In the early films of the series the working-class girls also have limited aspirations, which are a product not only of their circumstances but also of the narratives made available to them. Both Sue and Jackie have the opportunity to go to a grammar school but choose not to, seemingly concerned about being isolated from their friends and their parents. At twenty-one, Lynn recalls the teacher at school who told them: 'All you girls want to do is walk out, get married, have babies and push a pram down the street with a fag hanging out your mouth'. But her awareness of this social script, and her annoyance at the teacher for caricaturing it, did not stop her getting married in her late teens and having children soon after.

By showing that this close relationship between social and symbolic practices is in place at an early age, the *Seven Up* films also challenge certain pervasive notions of the child. The largely middle-class cult of childhood, which emerged from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, imagines it as a separate sphere which erases cultural difference and provides the unchanging certainties and simplicities missing from adult life. In *The Tidy House*, Carolyn Steedman uses her experience as a primary school teacher to question this dominant ideology of the child. She takes a story written in one of her classes by three working-class eight-year-old girls about the house on a dilapidated estate in which they will live when they grow up and have children. The girls' story is brutally honest about both their own life prospects and the way that their parents see them as a financial burden and an impediment to their own freedom and fulfilment. Steedman argues that young children can thus use writing as a way of describing their place in the social world, allowing them to 'critically confront the way things are and dimly imagine, out of those very circumstances, the way they might be', albeit in a way they would never be able to articulate coherently.¹⁶ She places such writing within the context of a segregated school system which has perpetuated and naturalized class divisions, and contrasts it with the long tradition of commercial publication of children's writing, which is always founded on 'the adult search for delight and gratification in watching the sweet pathos

¹⁶ Carolyn Steedman *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* (London: Virago 1982) p. 157

of childhood innocence unfold itself’¹⁷ *Seven Up*’ does trade on the cuteness and naivete of its participants, and in this sense seems like a prototype for the televisual versions (*Kids Say the Funniest Things*’) of the books of children’s writing to which Steedman refers, in which children are treasured for their infelicities of expression and comical misunderstandings. More usually, though, the programme sees this innocence as a product of their class identities and lack of cultural capital (such as when Paul asks what ‘university’ means, or when Peter says that he doesn’t think you need to go to university if you want to be an astronaut) and it presents the child not as a blank slate but rather as an active participant in these societal conflicts.

In the later films, class does not cease to be important but is shown to have a complex interconnection with other areas of life experience, such as love, marriage, parenthood and work. Apted claims to be ignorant of educational theory, psychology or sociology, and argues that the films are ‘hardly scientific, more a complicated and sometimes bewildering array of private moments set against the cultural and social background of the times’¹⁸. Certainly, questions such as ‘What plans do you have for the future?’, ‘What do you think of rich people?’ and ‘What do you do in the evenings?’ are not designed by a social scientist. But the vagueness and open-endedness of these questions sometimes allows the participants to provide unexpected or original answers and to show that their lives are more nuanced and multilayered than the programme-makers have envisaged. Whether by accident or by design, the project confronts theoretical models and representations of class with the messiness and randomness of experience. In fact, the films arguably have all the more impact because they deal with the concrete effects of class on idiosyncratic lives, lives which have been fleshed out so that they are more than mere case studies.

The project’s class politics are further complicated, though, by its affinity with certain universalizing narratives of the self, the most prominent of which is the notion of the ‘life course’. Thomas Cole argues that the idea of life as a series of clearly defined stages from education to retirement is a product of specific historical circumstances, such as the increasing regulation of time and work and the introduction of rigidly age-segregated schooling and pension schemes from the nineteenth century onwards.¹⁹ These social changes helped to create age as a universal social category.

Our awareness of chronological age is part of a more basic historical development – the emergence of individual lifetime as a structural feature of modern society. . . . In an increasingly rationalized, urban, industrial society, chronological age came to function as a uniform criterion for sequencing the multiple roles and responsibilities that individuals assumed over a lifetime.²⁰

18 Apted Introduction, p. viii

19 Thomas R. Cole *The Journey of Life: a Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. xxx–4.

20 Ibid p. 3

Within the period that Cole discusses, scientific models also emerged which saw life as a series of well-ordered and predetermined stages. For example, the cognitivist model of developmental psychology, which now dominates school curricula and health policies, shows children gradually moving towards maturity and wholeness from the presocial sphere of early childhood. The work of Erik Erikson extends this notion of development across the whole of the life cycle, through adolescence and young, middle and late adulthood. For Erikson, lives progress through the 'epigenetic' principle, the development of our personalities in eight, pre-programmed, psychosocial stages, as they respond to and deal with the problems and crises peculiar to those stages.²¹ These models of a universal life cycle essentialize the self, reducing the subjectivity of individual experience to normative, scientifically measurable criteria. They also often present the individual's development in terms of her successful adaptation to the complex system of social relations in capitalist societies, often by achieving a compromise between personal fulfilment and social conformity.

21 See Erik H. Erikson *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton 1950), and *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: Norton 1964).

As they have unfolded, the *Seven Up* films have adopted an ambivalent relationship to these developmental models. In one sense, the films seek to question dominant notions of childhood as a *tabula rasa*, by suggesting that the development of the children is affected by their original class identities and that these effects can be seen into adulthood. At the same time, the organization of the programmes does assume that life can be divided into stages, and the extensive use of clips from the previous films in the series emphasizes what Erikson calls 'continuity': being in touch with and retaining productive elements from earlier psychosocial stages. To some extent, too, participants are called to account for their actions and changing attitudes, and encouraged to make sense of their lives in terms of achievement and reward. For example, Apted asks Symon in *Twenty-One* 'Do you never feel you should be doing better jobs than these? Aren't you worth more than this?' In *35 Up*, he suggests to a temporarily crestfallen Tony that his various 'successes' as a jockey, part-time actor and landlord have actually been failures: 'But you didn't pull it off. You didn't pull being a jockey off, you haven't made it as an actor, you didn't pull off the pub.' In *42 Up*, he asks Jackie if she could have done more with her life, but she resists the effort to make sense of it within linear, developmental terms: 'I've just started all over again, but with three children. But that's life.' Apted, an ex-public schoolboy and Cambridge graduate, has explained this questioning in terms of his own background: 'I'm a pretty neurotic, ambitiously-driven, middle-class person from Ilford and I can't not be that when I ask these questions.'²²

22 Brooks, 'Seven Ups and downs' p. 2.

Another, related, frame within which the films work is the psychotherapeutic one, in the sense that they see childhood as a

23 Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality Volume One: The Will to Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1981), pp 61–2

crucially formative experience, and see traces of childhood as the fundamental core of adult identity. The format of the programmes as a series of interviews interlaced with textual fragments of the participants' lives also mimics the psychotherapeutic process, in which the patient comes to terms with past experiences with the help of the therapist. As part of his argument about the power of the therapeutic model in modern culture, Michel Foucault points to its implicitly hierarchical aspects. 'Truth' is seen as residing not only in the confessor but also in the person who listens to the confession, who is 'the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile'.²³ In the *Seven Up* films, this person (the interviewer) is more prominent than in most documentaries: the different programmes are held together by the authority of Apted's voice, asking often similar questions across several decades and providing the voiceover narration from *Seven Plus Seven* onwards. Although there are no 'noddies' – shots of the interviewer responding to the questions – Apted is clearly present, as his questions are often heard and the interviewees speak to him in three-quarter profile, sometimes addressing him as 'Michael' or 'Mike'.

In some cases these interviews are literally confessions, as Tony admits to 'regretful behaviour at various times' in his marriage, and several participants discuss failed relationships, divorce, and guilt at not being able to see their children. At other times they seem more like therapy sessions in which the interviewees are prompted to talk about failures in their lives in relation to past experiences. This is most apparent in the case of Neil, the boy who as a seven-year-old seems to sum up the spontaneity of childhood with his cheerful non sequiturs and hopes for the future: 'If I can't be an astronaut, I think I'll be a coach driver. I'm going to take people to the country and sometimes take them to the seaside, and I'll have a big loudspeaker.' By *Twenty-One*, though, he is living in a London squat and working on a building site, having failed to get into Oxford and dropped out of the University of Aberdeen after six months ('Anywhere else was second best'). By *28 Up* he is in the west of Scotland, living on social security, and by *35 Up* he is still unemployed and in sheltered housing in the Shetlands. Apted's questions to the adult Neil follow the hermeneutic model of psychoanalysis, searching for motive and significance in the fragmentary manifestations of a life – in this case, the archive of material from the previous programmes. Recalling the carefree child of seven, he suggests to Neil at twenty-one that he is 'kicking against stability', but Neil protests: 'I don't think I ever had any stability. . . . I think I've been kicking in midair all my life.' Neil tends to place his own story within broader social narratives, such as when he discusses the 'impersonality' of the suburbs, the 'cheap satisfaction' and 'aimlessness' of modern society, and his

disappointment with other potential life scripts, such as the romanticized view of Oxford he gleaned from the pages of *Brideshead Revisited*. But these comments sit uneasily within the therapeutic frame of the film, with its interest in tracing the causes of his decline along an autobiographical narrative line. This frame presents Neil's story as a uniquely personal drama of someone who has fallen by the wayside, with a potentially voyeuristic interest for its audience

As the series has developed, the narrative techniques of the films seem increasingly to be used not to show the determining role of social structures but the conjunctions and disjunctions between different stages of individual lives. In *Seven Plus Seven and Twenty-One* there is some intercutting of footage from the previous programmes in the series, but the primary emphasis is still on the relationships between different members of a socially diverse peer group. From *28 Up* onwards, though, Apted has told the stories of the individual members in turn and has used the previous films as an archive, employing more extensive intercutting to create illuminating juxtapositions in individual life stories.

In other words, the focus has shifted away from the sociological and more towards the personal and the existential. As the series has progressed, Apted has talked about the difficulty of compressing an ever-increasing body of material into roughly the same length of film (about two hours).²⁴ In *42 Up*, the three-hour interviews with participants are cut down to five or six minutes in the actual programme because of the amount of footage included from the previous films.²⁵ The stories of the participants are now arranged into separate sections – on marriage, children, money and religion, for example – which are introduced with some of the answers the children provided in 1964, and we look at how their lives and attitudes have developed in relation to these issues. Although equal time is given to each of the participants, Apted has acknowledged that certain people emerge at different times as more interesting or important, and this is reflected in the arrangement of the films. For example, Neil's story, since it captured the public imagination after *28 Up* and led to his receiving many letters and offers of jobs, has been told last in the two subsequent documentaries. *42 Up* was shown on BBC1 over two nights, and Apted uses cliffhangers to highlight the stories of particular participants. After the end of Part One, his voiceover says: 'And what about all the other children? What's happened to them? ... Is Neil still homeless? We'll find out tomorrow.'

Despite this emphasis on human interest and narrative suspense, the intercutting between different programmes in the series can still make telling points about the effects of class on life chances. In *28 Up*, for example, we see Andrew at seven saying: 'I'm going to Charterhouse, and after that to Trinity Hall, Cambridge'. The next

24 Roger Ebert, Foreword in Bennett Singer (ed.) *42 Up* (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 11

25 Apted, Introduction, p. ix

shot is of Andrew at university, with Apted's narration: 'Andrew went to Charterhouse and Cambridge, where he read law'. In *42 Up*, we see Andrew at twenty-one, saying that he would like to be 'a solicitor ... and hopefully quite successful'. Apted's voiceover follows with shots of an older Andrew: 'At twenty-eight, Andrew was a solicitor ... by thirty-five he had become a partner'. But the chronological mapping of these connections also means that the later films are less directly about class and more about matters of love, marriage, children and individual fulfilment. In *28 Up* Suzy is shown at twenty-one telling Apted that she does not like babies. This is followed immediately by a shot of her at twenty-eight, playing happily with her two children. In *42 Up*, Bruce is shown at thirty-five discussing the problems of 'reserve' and why he has not got married; there is then a cut to him in church, about to wed Penny at the age of forty. In order to get this shot, Apted broke a self-imposed rule of the series by sending a camera crew to the wedding before the scheduled filming of *42 Up*, in the middle of the seven-year cycle.²⁶

As a way of dramatizing the individual stories of the participants, there is also extensive use of what John Corner calls the 'profilmic'. In other words, the films' subjects are directed in certain movements and encouraged to act naturally: they are thus 'positioned as "actors of themselves" within these adjustments, designed to fine-tune reality for photographic or electronic "capture"'.²⁷ Apted has acknowledged that he constructs certain situations in this way for dramatic effect or in order to make suggestive statements about individual lives.²⁸ In *28 Up*, for example, Neil is filmed hitchhiking with suitcases, going into a post office to pick up his giro, walking to his caravan in the rain and sitting on his own inside it, apparently lost in thought. Nick, the farmer's boy, has complained that he is always filmed riding on the backs of tractors or herding cows, and that Apted paid for him to return to Yorkshire for *42 Up*, so that he could be filmed on the farm, in order to point up the contrast with his current life as a Professor of Physics at the University of Wisconsin.²⁹

More usually, though, intercutting between the films establishes continuity rather than difference. Jackie, Lynn and Sue are filmed together on a sofa at twenty-eight, thirty-five and forty-two, even though they are no longer close – and in fact by *42 Up* one of them has moved to Scotland. This emphasis on linkage and repetition is clearest at the beginning and end of all the programmes from *Seven Plus Seven* onwards, when the old *World in Action* theme tune and black-and-white credits appear. At the end of *42 Up*, the final section of *Seven Up!* is shown, with a voiceover describing the children as they play in the adventure playground at the end of their day in London:

Those from the children's home set about building a house. ...

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ John Corner, *Television Form and Public Address* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp. 79–80

²⁸ Apted, 'Introduction', p. viii

²⁹ Brooks, 'Seven Ups and downs', p. 2



Neil in *28 Up*. Images
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There's Nicholas ... and Tony ... Andrew ... and Bruce ...
 Suzy ... Jackie and her friends Give me a child until he is seven
 and I will give you the man This has been a glimpse of Britain's
 future.

These shots of the children at seven are now intercut with shots of them at forty-two: Nick loading bales of hay onto a trailer, Tony playing football on Hackney Marshes, Andrew on a country walk with his wife and children, Bruce getting married, and so on. The film's analeptic and proleptic devices are thus designed not merely to create anticipation and suspense but to bring the narrative full circle, as all the individual stories are returned to the foundational point of early childhood. By the time of *42 Up*, Apted was explaining this persistence of patterns established in childhood in Jesuitical rather than class-conscious terms: 'For my money, lives can change, but I wonder whether the personality ever does – if you're pushy and extrovert as a child, that never alters, and if you're timid and shy you always will be'.³⁰

30 Apted Introduction, p. viii

As the films have progressed, their class politics have also been submerged in a pervasive sense of loss and nostalgia which draws on the potential of television film to function as a historical archive of everyday life. Bill Nichols argues that documentaries, unlike narrative fiction, are usually more concerned with accumulating evidence to make a particular statement about the world than with creating a sense of 'spatial and temporal continuity between shots'.³¹ The *Seven Up* films offer a variation on this pattern: the disruptions of time and space sometimes construct an argument about the determining role of the class system, but they also create a sense of continuous time existing independently of its visual representation in the film. The effect is to privilege the reality of the passing of time over its technological manipulation in filmic form. This might be compared with the narrative framework of the photo album, which conceals its fragmentary status as a series of textual remnants of the past by plotting itself in relation to a chronological life story. As media which concretize and store images of past reality, photography and film seem especially able, in Stanley Cavell's terms, to reveal 'the world as mortal':

The nostalgia of old photographs is the perception that mortality is at some point to be stopped in its tracks. The figures in them seem so vulnerable, so unknowing of what we know about them, of the knowledge in store for them. We could know this about ourselves, if we could turn the force of nostalgia toward an anticipation of the fact that every moment is always stopped from every other.³²

Cavell was writing in 1971, when the stars of the 'golden age' of

31 Bill Nichols *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 23

32 Stanley Cavell *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (enlarged edition) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 74–5

34 Tim O'Sullivan 'Nostalgia: revelation and intimacy tendencies in the flow of modern popular television' in Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (eds), *The Television Studies Book* (London: Edward Arnold, 1998) p. 201

Hollywood had died or were ending their careers, and this reality of their bodily frailty could be juxtaposed with images of their youthful selves on the cinema screen.³³ Because of its status as a continuous archive, though, television is better equipped than the cinema to show the passing of time, particularly with the invention of VCRs, DVDs and other means of storing images. But it has barely realized its potential as an archive in this way partly because, as Tim O'Sullivan points out, it began 'as a medium without a memory'.³⁴ Many of the programmes broadcast in the 1950s and 1960s were live, and there was little systematic archiving of material until the 1970s, which makes *Seven Plus Seven* one of the first attempts within British television to use past programming as source material. In recent years, television has increasingly repackaged its archive in designated satellite channels, videos and 'theme' nights, but the emphasis here tends to be on the kitsch appeal of outmoded fashions and the canonization of 'classic' sitcoms. The *Seven Up* films use their status as an evolving archive in a much more ambitious way to explore issues of time, transience and memory. We are thus constantly reminded that the children in the original documentary are 'unknowing of what we know about them' through the endless repetition in the later films of grainy black-and-white clips, whose contrast with the sharp-resolution colour of the present adds to the overall quality of pastness and nostalgia.

Both Alan Wright and Maureen Turim have explored the use of the flashback as part of the cinematic presentation of time and memory: they argue that it invariably introduces a sense of causal connection and chronological unfolding, so that 'the past is determined as point of origin from the chain of events presented in the narrative or, at least, is positioned as associatively linked to them'.³⁵ This sense of the authoritativeness of origins is reinforced in the *Seven Up* films because we know that the flashbacks to earlier parts of the story refer to real lives rather than to artfully constructed texts. In this context, the films could be placed within a familiar critique of nostalgic narratives like the myth of childhood as pure and unblemished, the past is imagined as a secure source of identity and meaning, in a way which belies the fact that it is always mediated through textual representations and contemporary social concerns.

What rescues the films from an unreflective pathos, though, is their sense of discontinuity and fragmentariness, and the fact that this discontinuity draws attention to the always complex relationship between films and the world. Cavell refers to this relationship when he suggests that films present 'live persons and real things in actual spaces', while at the same time screening them from the viewer and excluding the world that cannot be encompassed within the viewfinder:

35 Alan Wright 'A wrinkle in time: the child, memory and *The Mirror*' *Wide Angle* vol. 18 no. 1 (1996) pp. 48–9. See also Maureen Turim *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989) p. 11.

36 Cavell *The World Viewed*
pp 165–6, 23–4

You can always ask, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame . . . We might say: a painting is a world, a photograph is of the world . . . The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection, are as essential to the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents.³⁶

37 Brooks *Seven Ups and downs*
p 2

Cavell's comments are again aimed at Hollywood film, but it could be argued that they are particularly relevant to a long-running documentary series like the *Seven Up* project. What lies 'adjacent to the area' photographed in this case is not simply the world outside the frame at the time of filming, but the lives of the participants themselves, which remain absent to the viewer because they are going on independently of the project and are only momentarily interrupted by it. Despite the apparently seamless way in which the different stages of their lives are spliced together through voiceovers, reenactments and other filmic conventions, there is always a sense that their experiences are too misshapen and various to be enclosed within relatively short films. Because of the practice of eavesdropping on lives only at regular intervals – what one participant, Nick, has criticized as a "Hi and Bye" approach³⁷ – there are always important parts of a person's life that are not shown, elements that remain resistant to analysis. Some of the most memorable parts of the original documentary – Nick's comment that if he could change the world he would 'turn it into a diamond', or Symon's dream that 'all the world was on top of me, and I just about got out, and everything flew up in the air and it all landed on my head' – cannot be interpreted in any conventional sense because they do not fit in with the various issues that the documentary has set itself to explore: class, money, relationships, and so on. There is a sense, in Cavell's terms, of life going on outside the frame, of material being accumulated which will never finally be assimilated or explained.

The *Seven Up* films are in some degree reflexive about this disparity between the continuous life and its representation on screen. The participants are often able to express doubts, for example, about the nature of Apter's questions, the purpose of the project and its preconceived agendas. As early as *Seven Plus Seven*, the upper-middle-class boys are openly anxious about being 'typecast' as the 'typical product of a public school education'. Towards the end of *42 Up*, after Neil's story, all the participants are asked what they have felt about being involved in the films and what impact it has had on their lives. While most say that it has been exciting or 'a bit of good fun,' others, such as Andrew and Symon, are more critical of the project's intrusiveness and the way that it has made their lives seem watched and judged. There is more direct proof in the later films that being involved in the project has itself altered the course of some of the participants' lives. The most dramatic example is the revelation

that Bruce offered the homeless Neil a room in his London flat after 35 *Up*, helping him to get back on his feet. Apted acknowledges this relationship when he films them talking together for the first time at the end of 42 *Up*.

Another problematic element which the films can never entirely evade is the fact that three of the original children have dropped out of the project. Charles, now a commissioning editor for documentaries at Channel 4, has not participated since 21 *Up*; John, a barrister, dropped out after 21 *Up*, only returning once at thirty-five to promote a charity and to dismiss the series as 'a pill of poison', and Peter, a teacher in an inner-city school, refused to appear after 28 *Up* because the tabloid press criticized him for his attack on Thatcherite education policy in that programme.³⁸ In fact all evidence of Peter's involvement has been expunged from the subsequent films, although whether or not this is at his own request is unclear. However, there are brief updates on Charles and John because in the early films they appear together with Andrew, who still agrees to take part. Another participant, Symon, dropped out at thirty-five because his marriage was breaking up, but returned at forty-two, providing further evidence within the films themselves that their existence is only made possible through the continuing, and often reluctant, cooperation of people whose lives extend beyond the documentary's narrative. Some of these concerns about the disjunction between real lives and their televisual representation are thus acknowledged in the films, albeit in piecemeal fashion.

38 Claire Lewis, co-producer of 42 *Up*, quoted on 730 *Report ABC* (Australia), 29 June 1999.

The *Seven Up* films remain a unique phenomenon in the history of television. The rapid turnover and short-term commercial ethic of television in the deregulated, multichannel era, and the decline of a public service ethos, make it hard to imagine another project with the longevity of Apted's series. In this new climate, one wonders how many of the similar projects begun in Japan, Germany, South Africa, America and Russia, or the many British versions produced for the millennium – *Seven Up 2000* (BBC), *Child of Our Time* (BBC), *Many Happy Returns* (ITV) and *Citizen 2000* (Channel 4) – will stay the course. Already, commercial considerations have affected Apted's series. ITV, which had screened the previous five programmes, declined to purchase 42 *Up* because it came in a package with the Russian and American versions of the series. The programme was eventually bought by the BBC.

The *Seven Up* project began as a means of accumulating evidence about the significance of class in formulating children's identities and determining their futures, in a way which challenged widespread notions of childhood as a sphere of purity and sameness. As the project has developed, though, other narratives have come into play – about the life course, ageing, memory, loss and nostalgia – which

have complicated this class agenda. These increasingly existential questions are themselves complicated by the foregrounding of problems of representation in the films and their status as social documents with particular, if constantly shifting, agendas. According to Nichols, documentaries are generally informed by a problem-solving logic: they present an issue, often from several perspectives, and then suggest how a solution might be achieved.³⁹ But the arguments which are brought into play in the *Seven Up* films – about the relationship between psychology and sociology, genetics and environment, nature and nurture – are never finally resolved because of the necessarily provisional nature of the project. The films ultimately avoid any sense of coherence and finality because, as the ‘Up’ suffix in their titles indicates, they are part of an indefinitely timetabled project about ongoing lives

Glamorous witchcraft: gender and magic in teen film and television

RACHEL MOSELEY

This essay brings together two interests. first, teen films and television programmes and the ways in which they deal with a significant moment of identity formation, exploring and policing the borders of femininity, and second, representations of the witch and of magic in film and television. My focus is on the figure of the youthful or teenage female witch as a discursive site in which the relationship between feminism (as female power), and femininity has been negotiated in historically specific ways. Beginning with an exploration of the concept of 'glamour', and using it to address texts from *Bewitched* (US, tx 1964–72) to *Charmed* (US, tx 1998–), through *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), *The Craft* (Andrew Fleming, 1996), *Practical Magic* (Griffin Dunne, 1998), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (US, tx 1996–) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (US, tx 1997–), I will argue that the representation of the teen witch is a significant site through which the articulation in popular culture of the shifting relationship between 1970s second-wave feminism, postfeminism in the 1990s and femininity can be traced.

I begin by offering three related ideas on the subject of magic and femininity which inform this discussion. The first is a definition from *The Oxford English Dictionary*:

glamour *sb.* 1 Magic, enchantment, spell . . . 2 a. A magical or fictitious beauty attaching to any person or object; a delusive or alluring charm. b Charm, attractiveness; physical allure, esp. feminine beauty glamour *v* To affect with glamour, to charm, enchant¹

1 R W Burchfield (ed.) *The Oxford English Dictionary* Volume IV second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989) p. 553

I am interested in the way in which an understanding of the root of the word 'glamour' reveals a relationship between feminine allure and magic, witchcraft and *power*. In the history of the usage of the word, the primary meaning – 'magic, enchantment, spell' – has been displaced by the idea of surface or physical feminine allure (although the relationship implicitly remains and is often expressed, for example, in popular songs – 'It's witchcraft' and 'That old black magic' spring to mind). In reinstating the primary meaning of the word, a profound but contradictory link is posited between femininity and magic in which femininity is produced as superficial and deceptive charm, mysterious and unknowable essence, *and* as power. In this essay I explore some popular representations of femininity and witchcraft in relation to this key, double-edged term 'glamour'. It is worth signalling here the significance in this term of the conjunction of ideas of feminine allure and power to ideas of 'postfeminism' as a way of understanding historically shifts in feminism, and the relationship between feminism and femininity. Recent commentators such as Charlotte Brunsdon, Joanne Hollows and Jacinda Read have questioned understandings of feminism which see female power as compromised by conventional feminine identities. For Brunsdon, the postfeminist girl or woman is 'neither trapped in femininity (prefeminist), nor rejecting of it (feminist). She can use it.' She is both dependent on, and dismissive of, traditional feminist identities.² The teen witch texts address the changing relationship between gendered identities and power suggested in the etymology of the word 'glamour' through their concern with the production and management of feminine identities.

Existing theoretical work on glamour comes largely from cultural studies and is empirically based, drawn from in-depth interviews with women. Of particular note here is the work of Norma Sherratt, Jackie Stacey and Beverley Skeggs, all of whom posit significant links between glamour, sex and class, or respectability.³ Sherratt's research emphasizes the trajectories of young women returning to college, and suggests 'glamour' as a significant explanatory category through which they expressed their career and life ambitions, in which a glamorous job was one which was 'interesting/exciting/different', and not routine, boring or dead-end. Significantly, the careers they thought of as glamorous were also typically feminine ones, and Sherratt identifies a lack of seriousness about careers which she argues means that their interest in glamour almost always lead them back to a domestic career in the home. In her research with young working-class women training to work in caring professions, Skeggs, like Sherratt, also sees glamour as offering the young women in her study 'the ability to appear as something different from the mundane. It is an escape route.' She also theorizes glamour as 'a performance of femininity *with* strength' and, while difficult to achieve, as 'a way of holding together sexuality and

2 Charlotte Brunsdon *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp. 85–6; Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Jacinda Read *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

3 Norma Sherratt 'Girls jobs and glamour', *Feminist Review*, no. 15 (1983) pp. 47–62; Jackie Stacey *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994); Beverley Skeggs *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997).

respectability'.⁴ Witchcraft then might be understood – and is frequently figured – as a glamorous and 'different' feminine career in teen witch texts. These accounts of the meaning and significance of glamour for social identity – managing an acceptably different identity in which sexuality and respectability are held together, and the pull of the domestic, to which I return later – illuminate the ideological projects of teen witch texts in which glamour as the conjunction of ideal femininities and (sexual) power is made audible and visual.

Recent teen films and television shows have been profoundly engaged in the policing of difference and the construction and validation of hegemonic femininities, in the correcting of 'aberrant' femininity. The central way in which they have done this is through the trope of the 'glamour' makeover and the space of the high school prom – the significant site in relation to which the 'magical' transformation takes place and in which the new identity is revealed. This is not a new project: teen films have always been concerned with the formation and production of identities. But while 1980s teen films such as *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986) 'made over' key female characters, they were also concerned with allowing a space for *difference* to exist, and addressed questions of class, for instance, head on, suggesting the significance of clothes and appearance to status. While in *The Breakfast Club* the characters attack each other on the basis of their difference, and near the end of the film Claire (the princess) makes over Alison (the basket case), transforming her from a messy-haired, Parka-wearing, animalistic outcast into a conventionally pretty 'nice girl' who is entitled to a romance, the film at the same time carefully deconstructs its stereotypes, interrogates difference and addresses questions of class and status. Similarly, in *Pretty in Pink*, while Andie gets to go to the prom with the boy of her dreams, it is ultimately on her own terms. Her difficult home life and lack of social standing is addressed directly in the film, and her difference, her 'indie' thrift-shop style, is celebrated in the film through the attention paid to the spaces she inhabits and to the details of her dress through the mise-en-scene as the camera pans and tracks in closeup over the fabrics, garments and accessories. Andie repeatedly quotes and performs 'middle classness' through her style, making use of pearls, smart dresses and jackets within her individual style of dress. Her prom dress is handmade and secondhand, drawing on the feminine ideals of the past – it makes use of her friend Iona's original 1960s prom dress, pink lace and 'proper' 1980s feminine styling in its design. The glamour makeover and the high school prom have not just been a moment of coming out in relation to ideals of femininity, but have also functioned as a test which addresses the conjunction of class and gender. The resolution of the film is too easy, almost trite, and the key issues around class and gender which it sets up remain

unresolved. Nevertheless, the makeover and the correction of feminine difference remain generically central to these texts and are key to their appeal

More recent teen film and television texts, such as *Dawson's Creek* (US, tx 1998–), *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999), *Cruel Intentions* (Roger Kumble, 1999), *The Faculty* (Roberto Rodriguez, 1998) and *Never Been Kissed* (Raja Gosnell, 1999), have often drawn on these 1980s teen texts, and have at their centre an even greater emphasis on the glamorous makeover or re-education of young women whose identities are in some way out of line with accepted ideals of femininity. While in *The Faculty* – which has been described as *The Breakfast Club* meets *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* – the mother alien turned out to be the seemingly innocent, blonde southern belle, an unconventional dark-haired girl reputed to be a lesbian is gradually made over until by the end of the film she is blonde and deserving of a heterosexual romance with a jock. In *She's All That* and *Never Been Kissed*, the transformation and reinstatement of acceptable norms of feminine appearance and behaviour are both more central and more insistent. In the latter, 'Josie Grossie' gets a second chance to go back to high school and be a teenage girl, and learns how to do it successfully this time, with the right clothes, hair and attitude. In *She's All That*, Laney Boggs is 'plain' and wears glasses, she is also intelligent, an artist and politically aware. Transformed into a potential prom queen for a bet by the most popular boys in school, Laney has to learn to negotiate her talent and intellect with more acceptable, conventionally feminine ways of being a girl.

At the heart of the teen film and television show then, is the glamorous makeover of the central female character, a mechanism through which appropriate feminine identities are constructed and reinforced. The glamour makeover as generic trope and as ideological operation are also key to 'teen witch' texts, and it is through an exploration of these texts – which are also concerned literally with magic on both narrative and audiovisual levels – of their magical textuality, that the significance of glamour as a concept in relation to gender and power is most clearly illuminated

In the pilot episode for the US television series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, Sabrina is introduced to her powers by her aunts on the full moon following her sixteenth birthday – teen witches usually acquire their powers at a moment which both marks adolescence and captures the moment of transition from child to woman, and thus the potential attainment of adult femininity and (sexual) power. This is also generally a key period of anxiety and instability in relation to identity, and is thus perhaps more easily policed. Significantly, then, Sabrina's first experiment with her new powers is in relation to her appearance and the possibility of self-transformation. As she stands before the mirror she changes her look again and again, each

transformation accompanied by a shower of golden sparkling dust and a percussive sparkle on the soundtrack. First becoming a 1930s bathing belle with a Marcel wave and a hat, then appearing in a 1950s-style summer dress with sunglasses and a pink headscarf, she nods approvingly at both possibilities. Next, however, she acquires a bleached wig, a studded leather jacket and gothic-style makeup; this she considers, but rejects with a shake of the head. Finally she magics a modern pink short dress and red shoes, but as she zaps the shoes to make the heels higher, they grow uncontrollably. This sequence not only offers a range of acceptable and appropriate femininities for the teenage Sabrina, but also makes clear which are *not* acceptable (the gothic/alternative look frequently made over in the teen text), and shows the dangers of excessively glamorous femininity (wearing too-high heels). Similarly in *The Craft*, four teenage girls discover the idea of a 'glamour', described in their magic book as 'an illusion so real as to fool an onlooker . . . one of the oldest forms of magic'. As they sit in the magic circle, Sarah changes the colour of her eyes, and then her hair ('so much simpler than going to a salon!'). Rochelle, a black teenager, wants desperately to be blonde, Nancy wants 'a smaller ass'. Through their concern with the notion of glamour and the production of – and possibility of changing – identities, both of these texts offer potential for a deconstruction of hegemonic feminine ideals. While at times these texts engage with this issue directly, I nevertheless suggest that the ideological project of the teen witch text in relation to femininity and power – glamour – is ultimately superficial, and that the particular ways in which this project is textually articulated are revealing of the pleasures and paradoxes at the heart of the postfeminist project.

As an illustration of the links I am trying to make, I want briefly to address *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999). The Lisbon sisters in Coppola's film are not witches, but they *are* bewitching and conventionally feminine. The literalized sparkle in Lux Lisbon's eye as she winks to camera near the beginning of the film is the signifier of glamour, of superficial beauty, bewitching femininity as mysterious, unknowable essence and magical power, and it reappears on the cards the girls send in the form of glitter. *The Virgin Suicides* pays attention to, and takes great pleasure in, the paraphernalia of teenage girlhood, using tracking and panning shots to lovingly take in the details of jumbled collections of images, jewellery, cosmetics, doodled notes and pictures. The other films I am interested in here, and especially *The Craft*, do the same.⁵ This is also the paraphernalia of witchcraft, marked then as feminine, of magical workings and spell castings: candles, incense, scented oils, charms, trinkets, plants and flowers. In *The Virgin Suicides*, there is a formal articulation of an attention to surface over depth, the camera lovingly caressing the surface of the image, but with the promise that something lies

5 Interestingly the image which often links them is that of the Virgin Mary, used to symbolize the goddess as the significant deity of witchcraft or Wicca, signifier of idealized femininity and carefully inscribed in these films.

beneath – beneath the simultaneous inscription of femininity as unknowable essence and essential superficiality. This essence is suggested through the repeated figuring of the identity of the Lisbon girls as collective rather than individual, and in relation to nature and the ephemeral – an impression achieved partly through their costuming in floral, diaphanous and faded fabrics, and through the lighting, which often threatens to make them transparent. Despite the promise that there might be something more beneath that glamorous surface of conventional beauty, the film refuses to reveal – it keeps you literally at the surface to which it pays so much attention. The sparkling paraphernalia of teenage femininity is gathered by the boys who collectively narrate the film and is obsessively examined, as the boys try (and fail) to read that surface for clues to the girls' identities. The film does not allow the viewer access to the girls' subjectivities except through the boys' imaginations. The textual articulation of the magical power of the teen witch performs a similar operation. Interestingly though, in contrast to the texts I have discussed which often end by reinstating it, *The Virgin Suicides* can be understood as an *interrogation* of the notion of glamour, of bewitching femininity as essence, surface, trap. The film website completed the text and similarly emphasized surface, presenting a collage of images and paraphernalia, but it allowed you to click on them and go through to windows in which teenage visitors to the site wrote about their experiences, dreams, desires and identities.⁶ While the girls in the film are framed through a male discourse and viewpoint in voiceover, the website has a marked feminine address, and lets you in. As Cecilia, the first of the Lisbon sisters to commit suicide, comments: 'Obviously doctor, you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl'

6 URL http://www.paramountclassics.com/virgin suicides/html_3/8 April 2002

The sparkle or twinkle (like the cute twitch of the nose in *Bewitched* and *Tabitha* [US, tx 1977–78]) is the recurrent audiovisual motif in films and television programmes about witches, whether as magical sparkling dust in the air when spells are cast, or as a magical percussive sparkle on the soundtrack made by a xylophone or celesta. Magical power in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* can be captured as phials of coloured glitter, and the spinoff magazine *Sabrina's Secrets* offered teen readers the opportunity to collect a free item of glittery makeup with each issue, and a sparkly vanity case to store them in, making the link between magic, femininity and cosmetics explicit. Sparkles are used as bullet points in Silver RavenWolf's book *Teen Witch*, and in the writing of the name of Irish girl-band B*witched. The glamorous sparkle – whether of eyes, teeth, cosmetics or dress – is a conventional sign of femininity, but for teen witches it also signals power made manifest as audiovisual effect, or spectacle. Herein lies the paradox of glamour in the texts, and perhaps in the postfeminist project. While the sparkle is powerfully spectacular and grabs the viewer's attention, it is also

- 7 Sharon Russell, 'The witch in film: myth and reality', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1984). Russell makes the point that in early cinema, films employed witches in order to maximize the potential for spectacular cinematic trickery

highly ephemeral, drawing the eye to the surface of the text.⁷ The textual sparkle as a marker of glamour in all its senses emphasizes surface: through glamour, feminine power in these texts is located in and articulated through appearance. In the opening credits of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, the golden sparkle encases Sabrina's body from head to toe, transforming her clothes, hair and makeup as it descends, and producing her, finally, as an ideal of femininity (Figure 1). Glamour is pleasure, it is fascination; it can also be central, as Skeggs and Stacey argue, to the production of a confident and assured self. In these texts it is additionally presented, however, as emphatically superficial, ephemeral and cosmetic, thus raising significant questions about the representations of gendered power they offer, and the femininities they construct and validate. The postfeminist concern with holding together conventional femininity and power, to which these texts clearly speak, describes a similar contradiction. Is there any depth to these fascinating images of magical power?

As a way into the negotiations made by the texts with which I am concerned, I want to address briefly the history of the relationship between witchcraft and feminism in practice and theory. Numerous feminist covens were formed in the context of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, and were often women-only and/or lesbian-separatist groups which celebrated witchcraft as a goddess-centred religion, based on a feminine principle which looked back to a universal matriarchal history and lineage and forward to a woman-centred feminist future.⁸ A number of commentators writing within the context of second-wave feminism re-read and reclaimed for radical

- 8 See Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and other Pagans in America Today* (1979) (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1997); Phyllis W. Currott, *Book of Shadows* (London: Piatkus, 1999)



Fig. 1. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*: Sabrina is transformed by the magical sparkle.

9 See Robin Morgan *Sisterhood is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970); Diane Purkiss *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

10 Mary Daly *Gyn/ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1979).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 17. While in Wicca the aged crone figure has a positive value, representative of age, experience and wisdom, Daly draws for her hag iography upon the popular crone image of the witch as aged, untamed and unattractive.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

13 Adler *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 179.

feminism the history and persecution of women as witches. Robin Morgan, for instance, made a claim for witches as the original resistance fighters against the oppression of women.⁹ This critical position understood the witch as a metaphor for female resistance, witches as representative of women who lead unconventional lives – outside that which patriarchal society deemed acceptable in relation, for instance, to female-centred communities or sisterhoods, personal and sexual freedom and political resistance – and who were punished for this. Mary Daly saw in witches a hidden history of powerful women, and reclaimed the figure of the Hag as a powerful, liberated woman, coining the term ‘hag-iography’ to describe this revisionist herstory.¹⁰ The triple goddess of witchcraft as a religion is understood to represent the three biological stages of a woman’s life – maiden, mother and crone – and is linked in turn to the phases of the moon. Here, again, is the essentialist figuring of femaleness in relation to magic and nature. Daly’s choice of the crone or hag in her revision is significant in relation to my project here, for what she does is to inscribe feminist identities in relation to femininity: that is, through a rejection of conventional femininities and modes of self-presentation in her privileging of the untamed, wild ‘crone/harpy’ witch figure and the exclusion of the more glamorous and socially acceptable maiden and mother positions. ‘Self-loathing ladies titter’, she writes, ‘Hags and Harpies roar.’¹¹ She also reclaims the word ‘glamour’ for feminism as meaning ‘a witch’s power’, citing Jane Caputi’s claim that ‘glamorous women are made up and done in’.¹² This position can be understood then as a feminist celebration of difference in relation to femininity, that which departs from the hegemonic ideal. The political protest group WITCH (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) stated in its first manifesto

Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary.¹³

Other feminist positions, however, have privileged more conventionally feminine witchy identities, those more in line with the maiden and mother positions, and have celebrated the witch as female essence, woman as mystery, as closely associated with nature and in possession of essentially female ‘special powers’ such as reproduction.

A related position is articulated in Barbara Ehrenreich’s and Deirdre English’s early pamphlet, a study of women as health workers situated in relation to the second-wave feminist rethinking of historical accounts of witches and witch hunts. They argue for witches as ‘wise women’ and autonomous healers working with herbal medicines, suggesting that the mediaeval witch hunts represented ‘a ruling class of terror directed against the female peasant population’, in which female witches represented a political,

14 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: a History of Women Healers* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative 1973), p. 23

15 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971) pp. 620–23

16 *Ibid.* p. 634

17 Elizabeth Reis (ed.), *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources 1998) p. xii

18 Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain-Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: British Film Institute 1992) pp. 3–4

19 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge 1993) pp. 11–14

religious and sexual threat to the churches and the state.¹⁴ Keith Thomas, too, suggests that witches were usually poor and female, and their motivation for the use of ‘witchcraft’ was probably a desire to escape poverty – the devil was said to offer perpetual protection from lack of food and clothes, as well as sexual satisfaction ‘like most forms of magic, it was a substitute for impotence, a remedy for anxiety and despair’.¹⁵ Furthermore, he argues, the accusation of witchcraft was levelled against women perceived to be non-conformist, bad-tempered and guilty of ‘cursing’ and verbal outbursts.¹⁶ If historically, as Elizabeth Reis suggests, ‘the concept of “witch” and the charge of witchcraft help[ed] to set and police the boundaries of female normality and acceptability’ by punishing female power and outspoken-ness,¹⁷ then in the contemporary moment, as we will see, it is through a particular negotiation of these feminist appropriations of the witch that the contemporary texts with which I am concerned figure the relationship between femininity and power around the postfeminist teen witch.

A short discussion of the place of De Palma’s 1976 film *Carrie* in this schema illuminates the shift in representation which has occurred around the figure of the teen witch from a key moment in second-wave feminism to the postfeminist era of *Sabrina* and *Charmed*. There is much at stake in the generic shift from horror to the more benign textual spaces of romantic drama, sitcom and fantasy.

Carrie is the story of a teenage girl, ostracized at school and maltreated by her fervently religious mother, who develops powers of telekinesis in relation both to the onset of puberty and the torment she experiences. Carol Clover has pointed out that the film is both feminine (in its concerns with the prom, the dress and makeup) and feminist. She cites Stephen King’s description of the story as being about a historically specific male fear of women, female power and female sexuality, and of *Carrie* as a woman ‘feeling her power for the first time’ – the context of course being the increasingly high profile of the women’s movement during this period.¹⁸ The film provides a useful context for discussion of the shifts articulated in more recent teen witch texts, in that it offers an address to the same generic and contextual concerns (glamour, the makeover, female power, feminism) at an earlier moment. Barbara Creed offers a psychoanalytically informed reading of *Carrie* as an instance of ‘the monstrous-feminine’ in which is played out ‘an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability’, the horrific failure of separation between mother and female child being the source of the monstrosity.¹⁹ *Carrie* develops her magical power at the moment when she has her first period, a moment which is linked visually to her discovery of her body as sexual, and in this way the film links *Carrie*’s magical powers to her female sexual and reproductive power. Creed points out a number of horror films which set up this relationship between first menstruation and supernatural

power – ‘woman as witch and menstrual monster’ – in which young girls receive their powers at the threshold of puberty.²⁰ It should be noted, too, that conversely the figure of the witch as unglamorous crone picks up on the historical perception of menopausal (and thus non-reproductive) women as dangerous. Carrie is linked to blood and the body throughout the film with, as Creed points out, the culmination of this association being the moment at which Carrie, the newly crowned prom queen, is drenched in pig’s blood and takes her revenge on her classmates.

While the iconography of *Carrie* links it with the more recent witch texts I discuss later, its significance is markedly different. While the witch’s home is dark, golden and glowing, for example, and surrounded by a white picket fence, it is not a benign space but a dangerous one. As Clover points out, this is a ‘feminine’ film, as such, it exhibits a certain interest in the paraphernalia and spaces of feminine glamour, and employs the generic tropes of the teen film – the prom and the makeover. ‘Glamour’ is present in this film, but Carrie and her magical power are quite explicitly distanced from it. The film pivots on the glamorous makeover of its outcast central character for her prom and sees her transformed into an image of idealized femininity and crowned prom queen. It employs this transformation, however, merely in order to make its withdrawal more powerful. In the mise-en-scene of the Senior Prom – ‘Love among the stars’ – the magical sparkle predominates, and Carrie enjoys her brief moment of ‘normality’ in the promise of heterosexual romance as the teens dance beneath a ball of sparkly silver stars, before a glittering stage and stairs. This glamorous moment is shortlived however, as Carrie is drenched in blood as she is crowned, her dress, hair and makeup destroyed. Her revenge sees the destruction of this space, her power signified not by a magical audiovisual sparkle but rather performed through her terrifying look and signalled by sounds which recall the ‘slashing knife’ violins of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Magical female power in *Carrie* is too bloody, dangerous, bodily, sexual and excessive to be represented with ‘glamour’ which, as Skeggs suggests, holds together both sexuality and respectability – the contrast here with Prue Halliwell (Shannon Doherty) in *Charmed*, who also has powers of telekinesis, is significant (Figures 2 and 3). Carrie is ‘unnatural’, her body anything but respectable, clean and proper. Female power in this film – situated by King and Clover in the context of second-wave feminism – is incompatible with the glamour of hegemonic femininity. Glamour, in *Carrie*, remains a temporary distraction for the teen witch, in the other texts addressed in this discussion, it is central to their power.

The particular engagement with the figure of the teen witch in recent film and television is problematic. On one hand it offers a pleasurable investment in female power, and enables an engagement

with serious issues such as male violence and sexual equality; in this way, the texts are often informed by 1970s feminism. On the other hand these are also postfeminist texts, both in the sense in which they engage with the exclusions of second-wave feminism, but also in that their investment is in the conjunction of conventional femininities with power: the idea of glamour spectacularly represented in all its senses. They are, in Brunsdon's sense, both informed by and rejecting of feminist identities. I will argue that the motif of the glamorous teenage girl as witch enables an address to female power and difference, but simultaneously raises questions about the nature of that power and the *policing* of that difference.

The Craft focuses on four teenage Los Angeles schoolgirls' experimentation with magic. Witchcraft in this and other texts is represented as sisterhood, and is initially offered as a way of addressing and dealing with difference, as well as with male violence against women. The differences addressed include those which second-wave feminism is seen to have excluded: race (through the figure of Rochelle) and class (through the character of Nancy) as well as personal appearance (through Bonnie, whose body is scarred). Differences of race and class are also expressed in relation to personal appearance and ideals of femininity. While Nancy (Fairuza Balk), Bonnie (Neve Campbell) and Rochelle (Rachel True) have been teaching themselves the Craft, Sarah (Robin Tunney), whose femininity is never in question, is a natural witch whose powers come from within: she has inherited her powers from her dead mother, and both of them are repeatedly figured in relation to images of nature in the film through setting and costume. Setting more



Fig. 2. *Carrie*: The horrifying power of Carrie (Sissy Spacek), the teen witch.

Fig. 3. Prue Halliwell (Shannon Doherty) uses her powers of telekinesis in *Charmed*.



generally is significant in the film however; the girls' high school is drenched in religious iconography, with crucifixes and images of the Virgin Mary. The Madonna is a particularly interesting motif in this film, for it is suggestive both of the emphasis on the Goddess, on the feminine and feminist principles in Wicca, but also invokes Madonna as pop cultural icon, and her postfeminist reappropriation of that iconography – in particular crucifixes and rosary beads.

Despite the film's initial rhetoric of sisterhood, the power of the young women's joined voices and gazes, and the concern to heal social inequities, the film ultimately becomes a battle between Sarah and Nancy, who are seen, respectively, as natural witch, mother and maiden, and unnatural hag. These distinctions are marked out through casting and clothing. Sarah's home is a gothic, Spanish-style villa – a natural space covered in creepers and bougainvillea, dark, golden and dripping with water. Sarah's real mother is dead, but the photograph she has of her shows her in a garden, in a flowing dress and hat. Sarah is also repeatedly represented in this way. Conventionally feminine, with long hair and usually dressed in earth tones and floral prints, Sarah's relationship to nature is persistently marked out. The magic shop the girls frequent is a similarly dark, golden, glowing space, and the shop owner who identifies Sarah as a natural witch is reminiscent of them both. Nancy's difference is marked out through the casting of Fairuza Balk, whose looks are less conventional, and her costuming in leather, metal and gothic makeup; notably, Nancy's witch look is very similar to the identity rejected by Sabrina in her experimentation with transforming her appearance. In terms of costuming, Rochelle and Bonnie drift between these two

poles, but the film generally represents femininity and magic in terms of a communion with nature at the levels of both form and content, making use of pans, tracks and dissolves to emphasize smooth transitions between images and make connections between the girls and the natural world. This is particularly in evidence in the scene in which the girls go out to the woods to become blood sisters and confirm their commitment to each other and to the Craft. The casting of the magic circle and the power of the supernatural is represented in this film, as in *Practical Magic*, by a circling overhead camera and as their rite is completed butterflies surround them like flower petals or leaves – a natural, physical representation of the magical sparkle which similarly engages and draws the eye to the surface of the text.

As the film progresses, Nancy is increasingly brought into line with Daly's metaphorical feminist Hag. She is figured as sexually active, and the power of her voice and unconventional appearance draw, for instance, on previous representations of the 'bad' witch such as that in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). As Nancy's powers increase, her costuming and makeup become 'harder'; she stops her stepfather's violence towards her mother by her scream, causing an explosion in the kitchen of their trailer and inducing her stepfather to have a heart attack by the power of her look. She comes to signify female power out of control, nature out of balance, a destructive force, and becomes increasingly abject in appearance – a witch, then, akin to Carrie. Using a 'glamour' to take revenge on Tim, she appears to him as Sarah, only to reveal her true self when Sarah arrives. As she moves towards him supernaturally, her toes dragging on the floor, she screams and shakes her head, increasingly harpy-like, using her powers to propel him out of the window to his death: 'the only way you know how to treat women is to treat them like whores, and that's got to stop', she screams. In the figure of Nancy as tough feminist avenger, glamour as conventional feminine attractiveness and glamour as female power are insistently separated out (Figure 4). In the final battle, Nancy's body is overrun with insects, her hair and fingers, Medusa-like, turning into snakes (Figure 5). The dark, golden spaces of the shop and Sarah's house are similarly invaded. The iconography of these spaces always suggested this was a possibility in their darkness and dampness, therefore a fine line is drawn between good and bad in the relationship between femininity and magic. As Creed suggests, the abject must be expelled in order to construct a clean and proper self, repressing 'behaviour, speech and modes of being regarded as unacceptable, improper or unclean'.²¹ Sarah wins the final battle, of course conventionally feminine, glamorous natural witch, maiden and mother are privileged over the sexualized difference of Daly's Hag, her power mobilized only to control Nancy's. To defeat Nancy, Sarah calls on the power of the north, of the earth, of her mother:

21 Ibid. p. 37

the picture comes to life and the wind blows through her mother's hair – an elemental connection is made between mother and daughter, femininity and witchcraft to banish Nancy's too powerful, too different witchiness.

In the ways in which it draws on a combination of feminist discourses of women's witchiness, *The Craft* emphatically privileges a very specific postfeminist conjunction of female power and conventional, hegemonic ideals of white femininity in its construction of glamour, irrevocably removing its feminist other. *Practical Magic* performs a similar operation, making the relationship between femininity and magical power safe through its insistent inscription of nature in setting and costuming. The film centres on the Owen sisters, their aunts, and Sally Owen's small daughters. Sally (Sandra Bullock), like Sarah, is a natural witch – she has inherited her magical powers more completely than has her sister Jilly (Nicole Kidman). *Practical Magic* sets up an unconventional all-female household: the house is disordered, the young Owen sisters (and their daughters after them) eat chocolate brownies for breakfast and do not do their homework. While the household is unconventional, in its representation it draws strongly on familiar discourses which construct the feminine and feminine space in relation to nature. The inside of the house is unkempt, but beautiful: dark, rich, filled with golden light, with twigs, cuttings of plants, bottles and old wood – images which draw on folk craft traditions. Witches' houses in all of these texts are in the gothic style, with cupolas, turret windows and white painted boarding, exemplified in the San Francisco architecture of *Charmed* and in the Boston home of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. The maiden witch aunts who care for the girls, while unconventional in behaviour and dress, give off the air of old money, of elegant times past, and are costumed in a retro-bohemian Edwardian style with parasols, veiled hats, natural fabrics, embroidery and laces which recall the feminine ideal of an earlier moment. It seems significant that mothers – the generational connection to 1970s feminism – are dead or absent in contemporary teen witch texts. Sabrina's mortal mother, for instance, is far away on an archaeological dig, and Sabrina is cared for by her (blonde, glamorous) witch aunts.

Practical Magic has a rich audiovisual texture, featuring the magical sparkle and making use of dissolves throughout to signal not just temporal shifts but also almost imperceptible mysterious connections between people, things and events, for instance, between Sally, her potion, a letter, the moon, a voiceover. Again, the film pays attention to the paraphernalia of feminine magic – women's writings, recipes, spells and candles. Sally is clearly constructed in terms of the natural witch/maiden/mother archetype. As a small girl, one night she casts a true love spell out on the terrace, using pink and white flower petals which spiral upwards as a magic sparkle.



Figs 4 and 5. Nancy (Fairuza Balk) as Harpie and Medusa in *The Craft*.

22 As in the in current British television advertisement for WITCH natural cosmetics based on witch hazel – harness the natural power

Sally is closely associated with nature throughout – she is often figured gardening, her hands in the earth, and as the Owen home is by the sea, she is frequently surrounded by a natural magical sparkle caused by the sun glinting off the waves. While Sally struggles to use her powers in a benign, socially acceptable way to make herbal cosmetics and remedies, thus linking her with Ehrenreich's and English's healer witch,²² and her dresses and cardigans are often decorated with images from nature – usually lily of the valley – in this film, magical powers are also used to fend off and punish male

violence towards women. Like *The Craft*, it draws on divergent feminist and feminine discourses of witchiness, but reorganizes them in a way which ultimately polices the relationship between women and magical power

23 See Purkiss *The Witch in History* ch 4

As with most of these texts, in *Practical Magic* the domestic kitchen is a significant site. It is interesting to note that while witches *were* once understood as women who disordered domestic spaces, and in particular the kitchen – for instance, turning milk sour²³ – recent articulations of discourses around witchcraft and magic centre on the domestic in quite benign ways, repeatedly privileging the alignment of witchcraft with cookery and the production of natural remedies and cosmetics, a connection to which I will return. Equally, the powerful female magic circle is present in the configuration of space and in the camerawork, as it is in almost all of these texts, albeit reconfigured. The unconventional wild female space of feminist witchcraft has been transformed. It has become a powerful, girly, sexualized space – a postfeminist space. In *Practical Magic*, the grownup Owen sisters and their aunts make ‘Midnight Margaritas’ together – their familiar rite is a riotous time where they drink and talk about sex, dancing around the table as the camera circles wildly around and above them, inscribing the magic circle.

The film draws upon ideas of witchcraft as a discourse about natural, domesticated femininity, and also inscribes, as performance, the stereotype of the ‘bad’ witch in striped stockings, black robes and a pointed hat at the end of the film. It is what happens in the space negotiated between these two representations which is problematic. The final magic female circle of the film, in which the women of the entire community come together, is formed in the Owens’ kitchen to rid Jilly of the demonic, sexual spirit which possesses her. Jilly is the problematic witch in this film. She is sexualized (‘Gillian has her own magic and we all know what it is’, says her aunt), independent and unconventional: unlike Sally, she does not marry or have children. She becomes possessed by the spirit of her evil lover whom the sisters have killed and brought back to life, and significantly, the signs of this female magical power gone wrong suggest nature out of control, symbolized by a rampant rose bush growing over Jimmy’s grave in the garden, and a bottle of tequila called ‘Diablo del Flores’. The women form a magic circle to exorcize this spirit, crossing brooms. While on one hand this is a consciousness-raising exercise, constructed as a girly night in and a way of dealing with bad relationships, on the other, bringing Jilly back into line, ridding her of the excessive sexuality which possesses her, is aligned with a reordering of the domestic space. ‘Come on ladies, let’s clean house’. Jilly’s mode of glamour, her nonreproductive sexuality and her magic are deemed neither acceptable nor respectable.

24 Nadene Ghouri, I was a teenage witch *The Big Issue* 19–25 June 2000 pp 14–15

In a recent article in *The Big Issue* on the growing number of teenage witches, Nadene Ghouri claims that these girls are ‘the same ones who grew up idolising “The Spice Girls” but now prefer worshipping Divine Goddesses instead’.²⁴ Teen witches are seen here to be engaging with a postfeminist concept of girl power which celebrates the conjunction of female power with conventional modes of femininity, and only in a very circumscribed way, with difference. Marina Baker, author of *Spells for Teenage Witches*, articulates the feminist principles of Wicca, suggesting that her book is about ‘empowering spells’ for doing well at school and not being scared of bullies:

25 Ibid

Wicca is about helping little girls to have control over their own lives. It’s about going out and communing with nature, not sitting in a room being Gothic and wearing black robes.²⁵

Similarly, the best-selling books of Silver RavenWolf, with titles such as *Teen Witch*, *Wicca for a New Generation* and *To Ride a Silver Broomstick: New Generation Witchcraft* have spells with names like ‘Don’t tread on me’, and impress upon teens and reassure parents that witchcraft and glamour are about spirituality, taste, good personal hygiene and a love of nature:

You don’t slap on a pentacle, wiggle into a black dress or dark pants and shirt, paint your fingernails a disgusting colour, wear wild makeup and call yourself a Witch. Nothing doing – to be a Witch isn’t a fashion statement, or the trendy thing to do. The religion does not require you to wear black. If you go around dressed up like that, real Witches will laugh at you.²⁶

26 Silver RavenWolf, *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2000) p. 15. See also Silver RavenWolf, *To Ride a Silver Broomstick: New Generation Witchcraft* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2000). Clearly, the increased incidence of US high school violence linked in the media to an interest in the occult is a context here.

In their representation of ‘respectable glamour’, texts like *The Craft* and *Practical Magic* reproduce a discourse which privileges magic, nature and conventionally ‘proper’ femininity over ‘difference’.

I began with the notion of glamour as a term which both figures, and can be used to interrogate, the culturally inscribed link between femininity and magic. This notion of glamour lies at the heart of the difficulties I want to explore in texts which figure young women in relation to magic and witchcraft. In the way in which it brings together conventional ideals of femininity and female power, ‘glamour’ can be understood as figuring a postfeminist identity which, whilst informed by second-wave feminism, rejects the feminist identities associated with it, instead celebrating and understanding conventional modes of femininity as *not necessarily* in conflict with female power. *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999), a reworking of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* and one of the most interesting teen films of recent years, also attempts to inscribe both a feminist and feminine identity in its central intelligent and engaged female character. She is sexually active, she knows about Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique*, reads

Sylvia Plath, listens to Riot Grrl music and is not invested in the prom (although she goes). The film seems to allow Kat to have her cake and eat it – her scholarship to an East Coast women's college, her relationship *and* her femininity. In the final shots of the film, however, Padua High School is finally revealed as a fairytale castle, a space in which dreams can, magically, come true: this fantasy resolution, it suggests, is only make-believe.

While it might be argued that these film and television texts which figure young women in relation to magic can be understood as part of a more general backlash against feminism in their policing of identity and ways of being powerfully female, these texts can also be seen as dramatizations of the anxieties and tensions in trying to articulate this postfeminist position. Texts which draw on discourses of magic and witchcraft in their figuring of young feminine identities point up the problematic keenly, because of the quite specific positions on which they draw, and the relationships which those positions have had in relation to feminist and feminine identities. In *Charmed*, the three Halliwell sisters continually find that their powers of witchcraft interfere with their personal and professional lives, disrupting their workplace and their home. Like Carrie, and like Sally Owen in *Practical Magic*, Piper Halliwell (Holly Marie Combs) yearns for a 'normal life', a 'normal' relationship, for a way of being both powerful and a conventional girl. The character of Sabrina Spellman in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* offers a fantasy of teenage female power, her magic giving her a way of negotiating the tricky emotional teen world of cliques and romance, as well as addressing the issue of growing independence and challenge to authority. The show, however, repeatedly dramatizes the difficulties of having that power, of hiding it from her friends and of using it appropriately, and always brings her back into line to accept the punishment meted out by her aunts or the 'witches' council'. Similarly, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy – not a witch but a teenage girl with supernatural strength – continually struggles to reconcile the conventional pleasures and ways of being a girl with the responsibilities of being a powerful woman with a job 'I want to date, and shop, and hang out, and go to school, and save the world from unspeakable demons. You know . . . I wanna do girly stuff', she says. She wants to have it all. *Buffy*, like the other texts I have been discussing, is engaged in renegotiating what 'being a girl' means now, carving out a new space. The image of Buffy, back from the dead and stomping on demons in her prom dress and high heels in the Season One episode 'Prophecy Girl', was a perfect articulation of this attempt. Willow, Buffy's best friend, does become a witch, and her relationship with Wiccan witchcraft and magic, compared with Buffy's struggle to hold together conventional blonde glamour and power, is a powerful marker of her difference – her 'geekiness', her Jewishness, her lesbian relationship.

These texts can therefore be understood as postfeminist, since they are engaged in negotiating the relationship between feminism and femininity. As I have suggested, in drawing on feminist and feminine understandings of magic and witchcraft, they point up the difficulty of negotiating such a position and end by policing, as well as articulating, difference. They predominantly inscribe and validate a respectable white hegemonic glamour. It is relevant that in most cases these girls are teenagers, because teenagedom is a liminal space – a time of possibility in relation to identity and power which is thus potentially easier to police.

It is illuminating to draw a line between the 1960s television sitcom *Bewitched* and the texts I have been discussing, and to think about the difference in the representations at those two moments of the relationship between feminism and femininity. As Lynn Spigel has suggested, *Bewitched* figures femininity and magic quite specifically in relation to the suburban domestic.²⁷ Samantha's (Elizabeth Montgomery) magic powers are harnessed in the service of the domestic (although husband Darrin objects to her using magic to do the chores), family values and her husband's business. As Friedan pointed out in *The Feminine Mystique*, despite the magical labour-saving devices of the 1950s and 1960s housework expanded to fill the available time, and as Penny Sparke has discussed, the 1950s ideal became that of the 'glamorous housewife'.²⁸ That glamour is figured in the advertising of those appliances which foregrounds their magical possibilities. They even use the magical audiovisual sparkle in their articulation of the glamorous, magical feminine with the domestic.²⁹ While *Bewitched* presents all three phases of the goddess of witchcraft – maiden, mother, crone – it privileges the mother and the domestic ideal. Perhaps surprisingly, this discourse has remained central in contemporary teen witch texts, and particularly the televisual ones, which almost always fixate on the kitchen as the centre of the domestic space. As I have suggested, the emphasis in *Charmed* on the problems experienced by the Halliwell sisters in trying to combine identities and roles – career girls/witches/ sisters/mothers – opens up a reading of the text as an articulation of the postfeminist difficulties of 'having it all'. However, the show generally privileges the domestic realm and role, for instance Prue facing the tension between career advancement and motherhood (and choosing the latter) when she unexpectedly has to care for an abandoned baby (and as in *Bewitched*, using her powers to help with the housework and childcare), or in its repeated figuring of spellworking as cookery around Piper's talent in the kitchen. Similarly, Silver RavenWolf's *Teen Witch* sends its readers to the grocery store for the ingredients for magickal workings.

In the historical and discursive shift between *Carrie* and *Charmed*, teen witch audiovisual texts have effected the banishment of the powerful and painfully present unruly witch of the second-wave

²⁷ Lynn Spigel 'From domestic space to outer space: the 1960s fantastic family sit-com' in Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel and Janet Bergstrom (eds), *Close Encounters: Film Feminism and Science Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) pp. 205–35.

²⁸ See Penny Sparke 'The happy housewife: domesticity renewed' in *As Long As It's Pink: the Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995) pp. 165–86; Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Gollancz, 1963).

²⁹ I am grateful to Helen Wheatley for pointing out this connection.

30 See Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg, 'Sabrina, the teenage witch: Girls, witches, mortals and the limitations of prime-time feminism', in Elyce Rae Helford (ed.), *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television* (Lanham: Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 13–40, for a discussion of the articulation of feminist and feminine discourses in *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*.

feminist reclamation (for example, Nancy in *The Craft*), thereby privileging the conventionally feminine, benign witch of *Charmed* and *Sabrina* in the process.³⁰ The power of contemporary young film and television witches is glamorous, not excessive and bodily; it is respectable (they are sexy but their bodies are under control and their powers in check), and it is domesticated. In this move, the contemporary teen witch is returned to the realm of the glamorous housewife of texts from *Cinderella* to *Bewitched*, in which magic is harnessed to the production of a clean and orderly (ladylike) self, domestic space and romance reminiscent of an earlier text *Calamity Jane* (David Butler, 1953) and the song 'A Woman's Touch', which centres on the glamour makeover of Calam (Doris Day) and her cabin. Here again, feminine allure is linked with domestic space, nature and magical power as the cabin and Calam are transformed 'One smile from her and zoom, little buds begin to bloom'.

The appeal of these texts remains located in the audiovisual sparkle which signifies the hegemonic glamour of the teen witch: the coincidence of her femininity and her power. While they often dramatize contemporary anxieties around the conjunction of gender and power, the commonsense meaning of the word 'glamour' is securely in place, with power, danger and difference safely contained on the spectacular surface of the text. The glamour of the teen witch may well be both a sequinned corset and a glittering prison.

reports and debates

The trouble with the Canadian 'body double': runaway productions and foreign location shooting

GREG ELMER

*I Smell a Maple Thief*¹

¹ While this quote may sound as comical as *South Park*'s call to 'Blame Canada' it is in fact quite representative of the overall diatribe against Canadian cultural nationalism. See Lance Gould, 'Blame Canada? Hell, let's declare war!' URL: www.salon.com/people/feature/2000/03/23/blamecanada/ [15 March 2002]. Among a string of senseless red (leaf)-baiting comments is the concern over Canadian female dominance of the US Grammy awards.

'Blame Canada', initially a tongue-in-cheek song from the soundtrack of the US film *South Park* (Trey Parker, 1999) has recently taken on a decidedly serious tone in the globalized era of cultural production, distribution and consumption. If we are to believe Hollywood production unions, the USA is facing an increasingly worrisome – and costly – export of jobs, ideas and images *to* Canada. Yes – the USA, long recognized as the centre of global television and film production and distribution, is becoming increasingly worried about the sleeping televisual elephant to its north.

Having lived for three years in the early 1990s in the downtown eastside neighbourhood of Vancouver, such 'runaway productions' – US television and motion picture productions shot in Canada – increasingly made for rude awakenings, street closures and other more surreal experiences. One morning, for instance, I was awoken by a loud roar, an uncannily familiar guttural tone that set itself apart from Vancouver's typical 'skid row' cacophony: I discovered a green Lou Ferrigno – aka the Incredible Hulk – practising his 'lines' for the made-for-television films *Trial of the Incredible Hulk* and *Death of the Hulk* literally on my doorstep. A few years later Hollywood would also wake up to find an unsettling trend in its own backyard. Increasingly, television and film productions were searching for

cheaper sites to produce their wares outside of Hollywood and California.

On a broader global note, the dramatic rise of runaway productions provides a particularly instructive case study of shifting bilateral and multilateral policies aimed at funding, subsidizing, governing and trading televisual products. This report details the political, economic and cultural debates over runaway productions, both from the established centres of production (Hollywood) as well as from the emerging production sites north of the border in Canada (especially Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal). Through an analysis of a series of cultural policy documents from both sides of the border, it is argued that while US-based figures of economic loss to Canada are somewhat imprecise and remain a minuscule fraction of overall US televisual production, US state and federal governments and agencies have nonetheless taken increasingly interventionist actions to address the issue. In fact, as we shall see, at least from an economic perspective US televisual policy, particularly in the state of California, has begun to mirror many Canadian tax incentive and state subsidy programmes installed in the early 1990s. Such shifts in US cultural policy bring into question the longstanding attempts by US trade representatives to challenge economic incentives and subsidies for cultural industries at FTA, GATT and, most recently, WTO negotiations. Since the Canadian government has fairly consistently opposed such tactics, most recently reaffirming its policy of global 'cultural diversity' and 'protection of domestic policy measures in the cultural sector', this report questions not only the economic but also the cultural impact of such 'foreign location shootings' for Canadian television and film.²

2 Canadian Heritage Department
*Canadian Independent Production
Growth Opportunities in a Period
of Consolidation* (2001)

The Directors Guild of America (DGA) and the Screen Actors Guild (SGA), two of Hollywood's most influential production unions, were among the first US organizations to question the increased number of productions moving some or all of their operations to Canadian locations. The Guild's commissioned research report³ has subsequently served as a lightning rod for debate within Hollywood, California, and most recently across the entire USA. Not surprisingly, given the tenor of the report, its findings and conclusions have also provoked strong reactions from the televisual community in Canada.

In defining the extent of the problem, the American Guild's report makes a key distinction between 'creative' and 'economic runaway' productions. The former is defined as a 'US-developed feature-length film or TV show, series or television film which is filmed in another country for creative (setting, director/actor/producer preference) reasons'. The latter, and the prime source of concern from the American Guild's perspective, is filmed in another country for clear 'economic (cost reduction) versus creative (primary setting) reasons'.⁴

3 Directors Guild of America and
Screen Actors Guild *US Runaway
Film and Television Production
Study Report* (1999)

4 *Ibid.* p. 28

The report clearly identifies Canada as the main beneficiary of such economic runaway production, with 81% of such productions going to that nation (Australia and the UK being the only other significant runaway locations)⁵ Perhaps of more concern for Hollywood and other centres of televisual production in the USA (primarily North Carolina, Texas, Washington State and Illinois), is the concern over rates of growth in the industry. According to the report, US-developed feature film productions shot in the USA grew by a rate of 2.6% from 1990–98, while productions shot in Canada grew at 18.2% annually.⁶

Surprisingly perhaps, while the report was commissioned by trade unions there is very little discussion of the impact of runaway productions on specific film and television workers (be they writers, directors, grips or camera crew). Rather the report tends to focus on two broader political and economic questions: first, the causes of economic runaway productions, and second, the economic impact in terms of loss of revenue for the specific jurisdictions (largely regions/states). On the question of cause, Canada is clearly singled out as being the prime beneficiary of economic runaway productions. Interestingly, though, the report offers a relatively sober and seemingly unbiased discussion (rhetorically at least) of Canada's 'integrated' policy for its television and film industries – a combination of federal and provincial tax incentives (linked to the use of Canadian workers) and public investment and support for production and post-production facilities. In fact, in some passages of the report, Canadian policymakers and industry leaders are almost lauded for their energy and enthusiasm: 'Unlike other countries, Canada has gone out of its way to ensure that producers are aware of the incentives and their subsequent savings'.⁷ Heritage Minister Sheila Copps, Prime Minister Chretien, and other Liberal MPs might even blush at the cohesiveness and effectiveness of televisual policy that the report attributes to the Canadian federal government. According to the report, Canada's 'integrated approach' actively cultivated a 'relatively undeveloped production industry' into its present vibrant state through 'a series of (usually tax credit-centred) initiatives to attract production activity and investment, and often creat[ed] qualifying requirements for those incentives that stimulate hiring of local personnel'.⁸

While the vast majority of political, economic and cultural issues that effect US–Canadian relations are largely ignored by the mainstream US press – the first US–Canadian free-trade agreement serving as perhaps the most stark example – the Guild's report and its main findings have received remarkably widespread coverage on television, in local newspapers, and of course within the US televisual production industry. In the 'rip and read' age of news reporting – where an executive summary or news/press release is read or rewritten almost verbatim on the air or in print – the Guild's

5 Ibid, p. 3

6 Ibid

7 Ibid, p. 21

8 Ibid, pp. 24–5

statistics on the costs of economic runaway productions have been unproblematically reported in countless US news stories and articles. Canadian responses to the report went largely unreported. The Directors Guild of Canada, for example, tried to put the debate in context when it reported that total Canadian production equals less than 2% of Hollywood-based production. More importantly, the response also attacked the American Guild's figures, noting that SAG/DGA used total US budgets, only a portion (\$573 million) of which were actually spent exclusively in Canada.⁹

⁹ URL www.whites.com/articles/1.html [10 June 1999]

Nonetheless, the report's claim of over ten billion dollars in lost revenue has often served as the focal point in many stories. This can perhaps be partly attributed to the report's secondary focus on the economic implications of runaway productions not only for the 'core' production centres of Los Angeles and New York City, but also states with smaller but still significant film and television production industries

What first appeared to be an internal Hollywood issue, however, soon turned into a national debate over the merits of free trade and the forces of globalization. At the approach of the US presidential and congressional elections in autumn 1999, vice-president Al Gore attempted to shore up his financial coffers – and of course attempt to secure California's huge presidential electoral college votes – by meeting with Hollywood's production unions. Coming out of the meeting, Gore directed the US Department of Commerce to investigate the impact of runaway productions. At the bequest of other California politicians, hearings were also held on the issue by the US Trade Deficit Review Commission.¹⁰ Such public debates and concerns over national cultural industries are rarely voiced so publicly in the USA, particularly in comparison to Canada and the European Union. However, recent protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle coupled with the 1997 WTO decision against the Canadian government's tax on American 'split run' magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* – essentially dumped US editions that offer American advertisements and little Canadian content – have seemingly provided fertile ground for protectionist policies in the US and cultural nationalism in Canada.

¹⁰ US Department of Commerce
*The Migration of US Film and
Television Production* (2001)

However, instead of stoking the flames of anti-Canadian and anti-WTO/globalization sentiment, the Gore-initiated US Department of Commerce report released in January 2001, entitled 'The Migration of US Film and Television Production', offered some unexpected – and for SAG/DGA deeply disappointing – conclusions. Some three times longer than the initial SAG/DGA document, the Commerce Department report sought to:

- 1) assess the impact of runaway productions on the least well paid and contractually secure employees in the TV and film industry.

- 2) document the trends in types of runaway production (identified by the SAG/DGA report as largely TV movies of the week);
- 3) ascertain the extent of foreign countries' subsidies for personnel and infrastructure,
- 4) detail how Canadian tax incentives have 'accelerated' runaway productions,
- 5) more generally, update statistics kept on the television and film industries ¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid* p. 1

In short, the government document largely endorsed the findings of the previous SAG/DGA study, drawing consistently from its published statistics. Yet at the same time, the Commerce Department's report substantially qualified the complexity of runaway productions in global terms. Thus, as just one example, while the emphasis is still placed on Canada's growing film and television industries (at US expense), runaways to the UK, Ireland, Australia, South Africa and the Netherlands are also highlighted and detailed.

In addition to noting the overall process of media globalization, the report also spent a good number of pages discussing how new information technologies have lessened the importance of centralized shot locations (in particular Hollywood Studios) and post-production facilities. In fact, some industry publications noted that the Commerce Department report put the 'blame on new technologies' and not foreign government subsidies *per se*.¹² What is more, the report itself highlights (through the use of italics) some language remarkably reminiscent of the Microsoft trial in its arguments that film culture has been completely transformed by new technologies: 'Today new technologies have allowed the film production process to become *unbundled* – it is no longer necessary to have all of the people in the extensive chain of film together in a single location' ¹³ Given that the same US administration argued that Microsoft's *bundling* of its windows operating software and Explorer web browser (and concomitantly its many businesses) constituted a monopolistic business practice, fermenting an anti-competitive environment, the report's language would seem to implicitly endorse the global 'contracting out' of televisual work.

Ironically, as previously noted, the report commissioned by California's production unions made little direct mention of worker-related issues. In addition to its focus on new technologies, the Commerce department's report by contrast goes to great lengths to detail the impact of television and film globalization on what are called 'below-the-line' cultural workers.¹⁴ Significantly, below-the-line workers are characterized by high overhead expenses, such as 'lighting, equipment rental, and special effects'.¹⁵ As such, the report argues, they are much more susceptible to both downturns in the economy and of course economic runaway productions. The more globally mobile, 'above-the-line' workers include writers, producers,

¹² Peter Kiefer 'US study of runaway production puts blame on new technologies and offers few solutions', *Inside Magazine* 21 January 2001

¹³ US Department of Commerce *The Migration of US Film and Television Production* p. 60

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13

¹⁵ *Ibid* p. 10

directors, casting crew and talent (actors) Below-the line-workers – the lion's share of a production crew – include production assistants, construction crew, prop department, camera staff, sound, stage and studio workers, grips, wardrobe, makeup and a host of post-production staff.

While the below-the-line unions surely appreciated the attention provided by the Commerce Department's report, the document itself made no targeted proposals in their favour. Rather, the report simply listed in its last few pages a number of recommendations that have been discussed in the past by labour, government and business. Taken as a whole, though, the report's recommendations are clearly in keeping with one of its main conclusions that '*nothing in our research indicates that foreign incentives were the primary factor in determining the location of film and television production*';¹⁶ that is, the report itself offers a multi-pronged response to economic runaway productions. Firstly, both within the body of the report and in its recommendations, the need for more accurate and up-to-date statistics is strongly affirmed. Secondly, in keeping with the SAG/DGA report on runaway productions, the Commerce Department report suggests that the US has attempted to derail foreign government incentive and tax programmes through 'international trade agreement enforcement actions'. The complexity and potential downfall of such a tactic is, however, also clearly articulated: 'industry participants agree that many complex legal questions would have to be addressed first, such as whether international trade in film is subject to rules applicable to goods or services, whether there would be significant industry support to satisfy legal requirements, and whether the provisions in certain trade agreements regarding the safeguarding of national cultures would apply'.¹⁷ Consequently, with such strong reservations over the potential success of future WTO challenges to incentive programmes, a consensus has emerged in California and across the USA that the federal government and individual states must themselves begin to employ Canadian-inspired tax incentive and industry support programmes. Accordingly, the Commerce Department report discusses the possibility of organizing a US Film Commission – an office which plays a significant coordinating and marketing role for many Canadian provinces and cities. Lastly, the report also suggests that the USA should simply follow Canada's lead and offer tax-incentive programmes and 'government-sponsored training programmes' of their own.

At the state level, Californian politicians have been at the forefront of legislation directed at providing tax incentives for television and filmmakers. In the spring of 2000, members of the California assembly, most notably Los Angeles Democrats Scott Wildman and Sheila Kuehl, tabled bills that offered a 6–10% tax credit on qualified labour costs, as long as producers maintained their

16 Ibid p 81. Emphasis mine

17 Ibid p 84

operations within California. Such legislative manoeuvring, supported by the Hollywood production unions, culminated in the successful passage of California governor Gray Davis's 'Film California First Program' in early January 2001. The \$45 million programme, which was initially tabled in the summer of 2000, sought to reimburse film and television producers for costs under the aegis of the state (public park fees, police support, public equipment, and so on).

As the US government, agencies, states and municipalities continue to look to their northern neighbours for tips on how to maintain and support televisual productions in their jurisdictions, the Canadian government has begun to incorporate the booming industry of 'foreign location shooting' (runaway productions) into its annual reports on the state of the Canadian Film and Television Production Industry. The Canadian Department of Heritage's most recent report (2001), co-produced with the Canadian Film and Television Production Association and l'Association des Producteurs de films et de télévision du Québec, however, offers a remarkably contradictory view of the economic and cultural aspects of televisual policy in Canada. At the outset of the report, and littered throughout its pages, an unequivocally nationalist cultural policy is offered: 'A strong presence for Canadian content in domestic movie theatres and on television screens remains a key goal of Canada's cultural policy'.¹⁸ Yet in light of possible liberalized trade policies and decisions from the WTO that would 'put serious pressure on domestic cultural policies', the report offers a sole answer to the forces of globalization: 'Canadian producers must seek foreign market opportunities, as growth is linked to international sales'.¹⁹ The contradiction between cultural and economic goals is not fully apparent until one delves into the reality of the total value of exported televisual products 'made in Canada'. Almost 80% of all televisual products in 1999–2000 (measured by monetary value) were in fact foreign location productions. By comparison, in 1993–94 only 58% of all exported products were foreign location shoots.²⁰ In other words, the Canadian film and television industry has over the past seven years responded to the globalization of the marketplace by increasingly producing foreign – overwhelmingly US – televisual products for the world's screens.

Such a clear trend in televisual exports obviously raises other questions about the domestic impact of dramatically increased foreign productions in Canada. The Canadian government's report, however, fails to address the simple cultural question of whether increased US television and film productions in Canada have displaced the production of *Canadian* products. In total, foreign production shootings have clearly outpaced the growth of Canadian productions

18 Canadian Heritage Department,
Canadian Independent Production
p. 4

19 Ibid., p. 8

20 Ibid., p. 12

²¹ For the purposes of promoting and funding Canadian cultural content the Canadian Audio-Visual Certification Office (CAVCO) administers a complex points system that awards productions points based upon the citizenship of key production personnel. A full explanation of the points system is available online from the Heritage Department website www.pch.gc.ca/culture/cult_ind/cavco-bcpac/pubs/produce.htm [10 February 2002]

²² Canadian Heritage Department
Canadian Independent Production
p. 20

²³ US Department of Commerce
The Migration of US Film and Television Production, pp. 70–71

²⁴ David Connell, 'Customs clearance runaway production update', *Directors World* 21 July 2000

From 1993–98, Canadian certified productions²¹ saw on average a 10% increase in value. However, over the same period foreign location shooting increased by more than 28%. Moreover, statistics show that the disparity in levels of growth has become even more pronounced in 1999–2000, during which period foreign location shooting increased by 37% against only 2% for Canadian productions. Perhaps even more telling is the sad state of Canadian television broadcasting productions, which between 1993 and 2000 averaged a mere 3% increase. An interesting by-product of the relative slowdown in Canadian content production is the concomitant increase in the *Canadianness* of government certified productions. Statistics from the Heritage Department suggest that while Canadians have been furiously producing US-styled programmes for US broadcasters and global markets, Canadian productions have become increasingly dominated by Canadian production crews.²² Such trends raise a host of questions about the possible balkanization of the televisual industry in Canada, with Canadian content productions becoming increasingly reliant on state funding as privately financed productions support foreign location shooting.

As we have seen, the trend in economic runaway production can be linked to a series of key changes in political, economic and technological changes in the North American and global entertainment industries. As many Canadians have no doubt realized, since 1995 the dollar has lost between 15% and 20% against the US dollar, making it much more expensive to venture south of the border. Conversely, the low Canadian dollar offers a dramatic reduction in costs for US productions in Canada. Various interests in Hollywood have also highlighted the aggressive marketing campaigns of film commissions and other arms of civic, provincial and federal governments in Canada. The US Commerce Department's report identified thirty federal and provincial 'incentive programmes' aimed at luring television and film production to Canadian locations.²³

Overall, the various programmes tended either to provide some form of tax relief (for example, the federal and provincial Film Production Service Tax Credits) or to target funding to address historically problematic areas in the Canadian televisual industry. The federal government's Productions Service Tax Credit (PSTC), which reduces tax liabilities to the tune of 11%, has also been noted by US producers as another factor in economic runaway productions.²⁴ Part and parcel of Canadian incentive programmes is the support and training of television and film crews. The growth in US cable channels such as TNT, TBS and USA Network, and the Fox network's challenge to the big three US network broadcasters (ABC, CBS, NBC) has also required more (and cheaper) programmes to air.

On both sides of the border the issue has been largely framed by

politicians and governmental agencies as an economic phenomenon, for Americans a trend towards loss of production and post-production jobs, for Canadians a dramatic growth of the televisual industry as a whole. However, given that runaway productions are cultural products, we might also consider the issue in symbolic terms. As competition increases in the television and film industry we can only assume that the use of landscape 'body-doubles' – cheaper locations used to stand in for more expensive spaces – will also increase. Clearly, in addition to the lower costs and the educated workforce, there is a purely *symbolic* reason why Canada will probably continue to attract runaway productions. In many ways Canadian landscapes *look like* the USA. While I have detailed elsewhere the concern in Canada over the effacement of their natural and national environment in runaway productions,²⁵ criticism over the generic look of land-lost television programmes and films has also been articulated south of the border:

the vibrant and multicultural life of New York, Chicago or Los Angeles is replaced with a bland and one dimensional look, and the world view of America increasingly becomes a country of ersatz cities lacking character and history. Films and television programs are the means by which Americans view each other and by which the world views America. We must do more to make certain that these views accurately portray what we as a country are about.²⁶

Such clearly articulated insecurities over the representation of American life are rarely articulated publicly in the USA. It remains to be seen, however, whether the US government and states will, in addition to mirroring Canada's 'integrated strategy' (through Federal and Provincial tax-incentive programmes), also develop a coherent and decidedly protective cultural policy against the increasingly land-lost aesthetic of runaway productions. Conversely, from a Canadian nationalist perspective, one must wonder if the Canadian government and cultural industries have factored in the cultural impact of having a televisual industry characterized by its role as a faceless, underpaid, 'stand-in actor' for American landscapes.

Thanks to Ryan Ellis and Elfriede Fursich for their contributions

²⁵ Greg Elmer, *The X-Files and profiles of Canadian landscape* *Borderlines*, no. 44 (1997)

²⁶ DGA presentation to US Trade Deficit Review Commission 13 March 2000

Cinema as 'Vernacular Modernism' Conference, University of Chicago, 18 May 2002

KAVEH ASKARI and JOSHUA YUMIBE

Organized to discuss and evaluate Miriam Hansen's recently theorized notion of cinema as 'vernacular modernism', this one-day symposium was designed to explore the concept with a view towards its heuristic value both for debates within cinema studies and for the interdisciplinary study of cinema in the cultural context of modernity.

The notion of cinema as vernacular modernism emerged in part as a challenge to the account of cinema as operating according to biologically hard-wired cognitive structures and transhistorical aesthetic norms. By emphasizing this cinema's relation to modernist movements in the arts as well as its relation to the social and economic processes of global modernization, vernacular modernism complicates the analysis of the formal and ideological aspects of Hollywood hegemony. It suggests that Hollywood's robust idiom, developed domestically to appeal to diverse ethnic constituencies, has been a major factor in its hegemony all over the world – not monolithically but by translating differently in a variety of national and international contexts.

The symposium was composed of three panels and a round-table discussion, and in addition there was a preliminary screening of Paul Fejos's remarkable *Lonesome* (1927) which was frequently referred to in the discussions. Each of the participants in the symposium foregrounded the process of translation through a case study examining the ways in which cinema as the first global vernacular played a decisive role in mediating discourses on modernity and

modernization in both local and translocal contexts. Moving from Hollywood into parallel contexts of translation during the panels and round-table discussion, the participants broadened the scope of vernacular modernism while keeping an eye on Hollywood's worldwide hegemony. The participants broached this wider conception of cinema as vernacular modernism in three main contexts: non-mainstream American cinema (race film and film noir), the reception of American films abroad (the flapper in Britain, Shanghai film culture, and film noir in South Africa), and non-American films that function in vernacular-modernist ways (kung-fu films in Zimbabwe and Hindi film music in Trinidad). Drawing from these approaches, the discussion came to address foundational issues in the history of cinema studies, the most persistent of which concerned the way in which the concept of cinema as vernacular modernism engages the legacy of theories relating film and language.

In thinking through the applicability of the notion of vernacular modernism to non-mainstream American cinema, the first two papers of the symposium – Edward Dimendberg (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) on film noir and Jacqueline Stewart (University of Chicago) on race films – productively illustrated the heterogeneity of film practice to which vernacular modernism calls attention. Focusing on noir in the 1950s, Dimendberg traced how high modernist aesthetics of discontinuity and simultaneity – exemplified by writers such as Marshall McLuhan, Wyndham Lewis and Blaise Cendrars – became intertwined with the genre through its staging of simultaneous events. This occurred most often in narratives of evasion and capture in which radios and televisions frequently bridged disparate spaces to stage their actions simultaneously. While crosscutting in the cinema was used to enact simultaneity well before the 1950s, the foregrounding in these films noirs of the then new media of radio and television illustrate how the cinema could foster reflection on modernization through its performance of new forms of social spatiality and temporality. At the same time, these films also registered the dangers and ambivalence inherent in modernity through their dramatization of the alienation resulting from the breakdown of private spaces and temporalities.

Whereas Dimendberg highlighted cinema's ability to engage modernity via modernist aesthetics, Stewart addressed vernacular modernism in the context of race films' employment of heterogeneous, vernacular aspects of African-American culture (speech, music and performance) to articulate and mediate a distinctly African-American experience of modernity. By using vernacular modernism as an approach to race films, Stewart was able to reexamine the high/low aesthetic distinction between the modernism of the Harlem Renaissance and the folk vernacular tradition. Race films configured this high/low distinction in a less dualistic way, which allowed African-American audiences a means

of coming to terms with modernity while remaining grounded in the vernacular framework of African–American culture

Shifting the discussion of vernacular modernism away from the production and reception of cinema in the USA, a number of the papers in the symposium dealt with the transformations that Hollywood films underwent as they circulated abroad. Laura Mulvey (Birkbeck College, University of London) discussed Hollywood's circulation through the USA's invention of itself on the screen in the 1920s as what she calls a 'democracy of glamour' – a recurring phrase in later discussions. Throughout the decade, US cinema highlighted aspects of American life for its national and international audiences with a glamorous hue, particularly through its images of youth culture and its challenges to tradition and often liberatory reconfiguration of family, class and gender roles. Mulvey centred her discussion of glamour on the figure of the flapper and the energetic, moving physicality that this embodied onscreen. She contrasted this utopian spectacle of motion with the static eroticized screen image of femininity, which she identified as a salient feature of masculinist cinema in her seminal 1975 *Screen* essay, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'. At the same time, however, the flapper's glamour papered over many of the complexities and inequalities of everyday life (racial relations, class differences, labour conflicts). To illustrate this, Mulvey explored how Maurice Elvey's 1927 *Hindle Wakes* reconfigured glamour from a British perspective by making socioeconomic issues more explicit than did its US counterparts, translating the glamorous flapper out of a middle-class milieu into a working-class, factory environment. Her ultimate rejection of marriage demarcates the film further from the US context in its refusal to be a vehicle for upward mobility. At the same time the film demonstrates, perhaps more forcibly, the spectacle of the flapper's energetic physicality that is in excess of narrative logic by relating her image to the rollercoaster thrills of the amusement park – a topos also picked up by Fejos's *Lonesome*. In doing so, *Hindle Wakes* makes evident the ambivalence inherent in the USA's 'democracy of glamour', for through its images both the contradictions and the liberatory potentials of modernity are made manifest.

Against the backdrop of Hollywood cinema's circulation and reception in China during the 'golden age' of Chinese silent cinema in the 1930s, Zhang Zhen's (New York University) talk focused on the polemical debates between 'soft' (high-modernist, entertainment-oriented) and 'hard' (leftist, politically-oriented) film critics and filmmakers. Provoked both by the incursion and local transformation of US aesthetic forms such as Hollywood cinema, jazz, fashion and art deco, and by the nationalist, vernacular movement in Chinese literature, the Shanghai cinema of this time refracted these debates. The way in which these contestations transformed China's

commercial film industry into an increasingly politicized one underscored each side's competing claims about, and solutions for, navigating the problems of Shanghai urban modernity in the 1930s.

Rosalind Morris (Columbia University) continued the discussion of Hollywood's global circulation in her paper on the reception of the radical violence of American film noir by black South African spectators from the 1940s to the 1990s. Morris theorized this form of reception as a mode of 'overhearing': a type of reception in which an audience receives and interprets a message not necessarily intended for it. 'Overhearing' may be a form of reception that Hollywood cinema – and in particular film noir, because of the hybridity of its debated origins (its association with German Expressionism and initial recognition by French critics) – is particularly good at fostering, thus accounting for much of its global appeal. Through this process of overhearing, black South Africans recognized aspects of the very real violence they were subject to and, as a result, translated aspects of noir gangsterism into everyday social practice. By the 1980s and 1990s, these translations had become politically radicalized as struggles against apartheid and were illustrated in productions such as Oliver Schmitz's and Thomas Mogotlane's *Mapantsula* (1988) and Teboho Mahlatsi's television serial, *Yizo Yizo* (tx 1999).

The symposium also illustrated vernacular modernism's applicability to the transnational circulation and reception of non-Hollywood films. Lesley Stern (University of California, San Diego) used the reception of Hong Kong kung-fu films, and their adaptation by the Amakhosa performance group into dance-music-fighting performances in Zimbabwe during the 1970s and 1980s, to think about 'how movies move' both on the screen and among global screens. She explored the appeal and utopian dimensions of kung-fu films' kinetic energy as exemplified in the fighters' fantastical ability to defy gravity and fly. This radical energy provided its African spectators with a sense of empowerment – one that, as Mulvey noted in discussion, has an affinity with the reception of the flapper and the topos of the rollercoaster. Coupled with the pedagogic nature of kung-fu films, this sense of empowerment helped the Amakhosa consciously to foster an alternative public sphere that moderated the turbulent, violent effects of modernity in Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Tejaswini Niranjana's (Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore) paper about the circulation of Hindi cinema in Trinidad among the descendants of indentured Indian labourers focused on the heterogeneity of the cinematic medium. She noted that it was not Hindi films' visual spectacles nor their narrative structures that typically functioned in vernacular-modernist ways in Trinidad, but rather their music tracks. Many of these popular songs took on a life of their own as they circulated throughout Trinidad on the radio, frequently being covered and reinterpreted. While providing Indian

descendents with access to their heritage as they grappled with their racial and cultural identities in diaspora, these songs transformed that heritage to fit Trinidadian urban space.

The emphasis on these translatable, and hence transnational, aspects of cinema as vernacular modernism prompted a broader debate throughout the symposium on how the concept sheds new light on theoretical issues central to the formation of academic cinema studies. In his introductory remarks, Tom Gunning (University of Chicago) pointed out the historical importance of the analogy between film and language in relation to the meaning of the term 'vernacular' as common speech distinct from the official grammar (initially Latin). Claims that film operates and can be read like a language were essential in the establishment of cinema studies as an academic discipline three decades ago, and claims that film serves as a corrective to shortcomings in linguistic communication were essential in the founding texts of film theory from Vachel Lindsay to André Bazin. If, in the current state of the discipline, we understand both the grand theory analogy between film and language of the 1970s and the earlier founding myth of film as a universal language to have collapsed 'under the weight of their own ambition', Gunning stated, 'as founding myths of both our discipline and our medium they should not simply be dismissed. Rather, their ruins need to be explored, or their spectres will haunt us unknowingly.'

Several of the papers dealt with the concept of vernacularity and its linguistic foundation foregrounded by Gunning. A debate on this topic was sparked by Dudley Andrew's (Yale University) counterproposition to conceive of the vernacular in terms of an architectural metaphor rather than a linguistic one. In reference to Japanese cinema before *Rashomon*, he derived this metaphor by expanding the claim of genre theorists that genres function as 'architectural' prototypes. These prototypes include groups of films and also groups of people whose congregation is predicated upon the anticipation of these structures. Andrew proposed that, while the genre theorists stop at the level of form, the architectural metaphor is useful for a discussion of cinema as vernacular modernism if made to address the wider dimensions of the public sphere that cinema encompasses – if made to address, in Hansen's terms, the aesthetic horizon that helped audiences recognize and negotiate the historical experience of modernization.

The debate between the specificity of these concepts raised a variety of questions, which spanned the historical uses of the metaphors to issues of translation and the rigidity of the architectural model. The primary stakes of this debate emerged during the round-table discussion – which also included Dipesh Chakrabarty (University of Chicago), John Comaroff (University of Chicago), Natasa Durovicova (University of Iowa), Norma Field (University of Chicago) and James Schamus (Columbia University) – around

Andrew's rejection of the linguistic model, which for him meant conceiving of cinema as a medium of communication rather than a distinct aesthetic structure to be inhabited. Andrew's concern was that the former model would rely too heavily on the sociology of reception studies over the study of the structure of cinematic texts and institutions. Hansen responded to this concern by insisting that the vernacular had to be more broadly understood as an idiom rather than as a medium of communication. As an idiom the vernacular implies the lived experience of everyday usage as well as a sense of architectural design in the form of rhetorical topoi. She acknowledged the usefulness of the architectural conception but pointed out the importance of maintaining this conception of the vernacular as an idiom, particularly with regard to issues of translation between the local, national and transnational contexts. Topoi can be thought of as translatable in a way that buildings cannot, and the analysis of what films mean to different people and publics depends on this notion of translatability. With its emphasis on the connections between the local contexts and global circulation of cinematic idioms, the discussion generated by the symposium marks an important step in our ability to draw productive historical and theoretical correlations between these diverse contexts as an alternative to universalizing theoretical paradigms.

reviews

Bill Nichols (ed.), *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 2001, 331 pp.

ALISON BUTLER

If the films and writings of Maya Deren had been lost and were rediscovered in 2002, how would they be assimilated into the avant-garde canon? In some ways this is an attractive proposition, a simpler prospect than the situation in which we actually encounter Deren's work, through the mediation of a reputation which, like her most famous films, is structured by the trope of multiple personality. Since her death in 1961, she has been situated in relation to poetry and myth, trance and ritual, dance, surrealism, film noir and melodrama; feminists have contested her inscription into the history of the avant garde as 'mother' of a distinctly male movement; filmmakers from Sally Potter to David Lynch have been inspired by her; and fans have made her a cult figure comparable to Frida Kahlo or Georgia O'Keeffe (or, as Charlotte Nekola has it, 'the most bad, the worst bad girl in the world, Maya Deren')¹

Deren's views on art and on her own films often diverge sharply from those of her critics and admirers: she was adamant in her rejection of the label 'surrealist', and the sobriety of her theoretical writing, with its emphasis on the moral responsibility of the artist, sets her apart from much underground cinema. Her primary interest as a filmmaker and theorist was in the development of forms of expression specific to the cinema and responsive to the modern age, and her vigorous refutation of Freudian readings of the content of her films is at odds with the perceptions of two generations of viewers versed in psychoanalytic film theory. Although there is an extensive critical literature on Maya Deren, there is no real consensus on the meanings of her work and the value of her

¹ Charlotte Nekola 'On not being Maya Deren' *Wide Angle*, vol 18 no 4 (1996)

contribution; and – astonishingly – this collection of critical evaluations is the first book-length study of its kind.

Appearing after a hiatus of more than a decade in major publications on Deren, the essays in this collection register the changes in the landscape of film studies in a number of ways in the painstaking efforts of scholars to establish a proper historical context for the analysis of her work, in their attention to its interdisciplinarity, and in the peaceful co-existence within one volume of a number of different critical perspectives. One of the most useful aspects of the book is the inclusion, as an appendix, of Deren's major theoretical essay, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*. Citation and exegesis of this essay enable several of the contributors to shed new light on Deren, and, in the process, clarify previously obscure aspects of her aesthetics. At the same time, the deliberate inclusion of a broad range of perspectives preserves the complexity and multiplicity of her legend and legacy. In a playful homage to Deren's essay, the contents page reflects this diversity by tabulating sections A, B and C against strands 1, 2 and 3, offering 'horizontal' or 'vertical' routes through the twelve contributions, emphasizing, respectively, different aspects of Deren's work and different cultural and historical frames of reference for its evaluation.

The most familiar of these strands concerns Deren's public persona, inside and outside the texts of her films. Jane Brakhage Wodening's personal memoir of Deren would not be out of place amongst the documents collected in *The Legend of Maya Deren*,² and concurs with the recollections of many others in emphasizing her volatility, equally evident in her self-expression and in her communications on behalf of voodoo deities (throwing flaming rum at Stan Brakhage in his best suit, for instance). Barbara Hammer's 'Maya Deren and me' describes the influence of Deren's films on Hammer's own practice, and her importance as a rare and powerful female role model in the largely male tradition of American experimental cinema. Maria Pramaggiore contributes a revisionist reading of Deren's trilogy from a bisexual perspective, arguing that the fluid patterning of desire and identification in the films and the absence of coupled closure invites such an interpretation, regardless of Deren's personal orientation. Catherine Sousslof's essay explores the tensions inherent in the notion of the 'woman artist', and situates Deren in relation to this concept, at a crossroads between the discourse of the US avant garde and the discourse of feminism. Although Sousslof's claim that 'feminist film theory, which uses a psychoanalytic approach, has not addressed the issue of female subjectivity in the films of Maya Deren' (p. 116) is slightly baffling (in view of analyses by Judith Higginbottom, Judith Mayne and Lauren Rabinovitz, to name but a few),³ her argument that Deren's 'repetition to excess of self-portraiture' (p. 123) evidences a

2 Veve A. Clark, Millicent Hodson and Catrina Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren: a Documentary Biography and Collected Works* Volumes I and II (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1984 and 1988).

3 Judith Higginbottom, *Maya Deren* (London: Circles, 1984); Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943–1971* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

protofeminist sensitivity to the contradictions of the woman artist's existence, soundly and elegantly made.

However, rather than confirming the frame of reference which locates Deren's work squarely within traditions of female artistic self-inscription, the most interesting contributions to the book confront some of the aspects of Deren's theory and practice over which previous criticism has tended to pass in baffled silence. Maureen Turim considers Deren's concept of form, a preeminent value in her theoretical writing, particularly *Anagram*, and the cause of her differences with Jonas Mekas over personal film and the direction of the US avant garde. Deren's notion of an 'ethics of form' can appear deeply at odds with her films if these are viewed as convulsive expressions of a feminine unconscious, but Turim argues that Deren's films create meaning through tightly controlled structural patterns which anticipate the developments of structural film and feminist experimental cinema. Ute Holl unravels one of the most challenging issues in Deren scholarship: the meaning and consequences of her rejection of the conception of the unconscious forged by psychoanalysis and embraced by surrealism in favour of the idea of trance. Holl clarifies the meanings of trance for Deren by tracing the background of her father, Dr Solomon Derenkowsky, in experimental psychoneurology, and showing how Deren's reading in this field established it as a productive alternative to psychoanalysis. For Deren, psychoneurological investigations of trance and other altered states had two distinct advantages over psychoanalytic investigations of hysteria: they constructed these states as meaningful collective social experience rather than individual pathology, and they focused on neurological causes rather than unconscious processes. Holl discovers tangible links between the Russian school of experimental psychology, in which Deren's father trained, and early film theory in the person of Hugo Munsterberg, and links Deren's own film theory to this perspective. Her frequent insistence that the camera and editing actually create reality takes on new meaning in the context of experimental psychology's studies on the stimulation of mental states by physical events (including the stimulation of the illusion of movement in the brain by the presentation of film at twenty-four frames per second). Holl compares Deren's theory of montage to Vertov's, and describes her films as precise constructions which bring new experiences into existence. At the same time, however, Holl argues that Deren's work is less manipulative than propaganda or mainstream cinema because it points to its own technical means, and to the social systems with which its modern rituals engage. 'While our minds are unconsciously moved to perceive bodies in movement, we can consciously understand that the dance of identification we see is a social ritual in which we ourselves participate' (p. 175). By tracing the historical context for Deren's theoretical positions in detail, Holl restores coherence to

arguments which previously appeared as obscurely motivated fragments.

Renata Jackson's and Annette Michelson's contributions on Deren's aesthetics focus on the neglected text of *Anagram*. Michelson situates the 1946 essay, which opens with an attack on the supposed apathy of many towards the atom bomb, in the context of the New Criticism, and compares the moral lethargy which Deren castigates to the 'dissociation of sensibility' postulated by T.S. Eliot. Like Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and the individual talent', Deren argues for the impersonality of art and its capacity to express the collective unconscious, or 'cultural memory' as she terms it, as a way of overcoming the anomie and atomism characteristic of modern culture. Michelson also traces a number of parallels between Deren and Eisenstein, and argues that Deren should be accorded a comparable importance as a contributor to the *pensée sauvage* of avant-garde cinema. Deren's abandoned Haitian footage, which Michelson compares to Eisenstein's unmade film, *Que viva Mexico!* is seen as a testimony to the depth of her realization of the complexity and integrity of a cultural form which cannot be abstracted from its larger context (although Mark Franko's essay in this volume suggests that this is precisely what was done in Deren's collaboration with the African-American dancer Talley Beatty in *Study in Choreography for the Camera*). Jackson provides another cluster of missing links in Deren's theoretical universe, tracing her pronouncements on art and ethics in *Anagram* to the influence of T.E. Hulme's commentary on Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, and to the New Criticism, revealing on the one hand Deren's debt to imagist poetics, and on the other her understanding of cinema as a time-based medium which, Jackson suggests, anticipates aspects of the film theory of Gilles Deleuze. Both Michelson and Jackson show that Deren's use of terms such as 'classicism' and 'chamber films' to describe her work is neither anomalistic, nor reducible to a self-promoting product differentiation, but indicative of a thoroughly considered position intentionally at odds with both the romantic individualism of abstract expressionism and the commodification of personality in the emerging postwar art market.

Contributions from Lucy Fischer and Moira Sullivan situate Deren's work in relation to other artistic traditions and cultural practices, although lack of space prohibits me from discussing these in detail. As a whole, the book is a major contribution to Deren scholarship, of immense value in providing a full and considered context for the understanding of her work without reducing its complexity or imposing a forced reconciliation on the contradictions and tensions of the life and work of a filmmaker whose struggles to realize *and* efface herself through art encapsulate the dilemmas of her position as an artist, a theoretician, an ethnographer and a woman.

Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000, 298 pp.

DAVID MARTIN-JONES

Laura Marks's work is very difficult to categorize. How exactly do we situate a work which focuses on 'intercultural cinema' (p. 5), Marks's term for, roughly speaking, films created in western metropolises by postcolonial, exiled or diasporic artists, between 1985 and 1995? In fact, the body of work which Marks describes resists all attempts to be synthesized into a coherent whole based on either its formal characteristics, or the national context from which it emerged. The films analyzed often breach boundaries between such recognizable categories as art and avant-garde cinemas. Her discussion ranges from feature-length art films – such as *Calendar* (Atom Egoyan, 1993) – through experimental video films of a few minutes in length, to art gallery installation films, to works produced by government-funded projects. In fact, it soon becomes apparent that the definition of cinema which Marks uses to define the intercultural is as loose as 'anything that has been filmed'.

This refusal to categorize its object cinema into recognizable types contributes significantly to the book's major strength, its liminality. Rather than creating confusion, the apparent lack of distinction between these different forms actually serves to emphasize the similarities between the films that become evident once Marks groups them together. The intercultural aesthetic is not, we are shown in this way, solely to be found in any one type of film. Rather it is applicable to all films which attempt to create what she calls a 'haptic visuality' (p. xi).

For the spectator of intercultural cinema, Marks argues, the

experience of viewing is 'tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes' (p. xi) Through the creation of an aesthetic that appeals to sensory perception other than that of vision (in particular, through touch, smell and taste) intercultural films challenge the ocular supremacy of the Euro-American mode of cinematic representation By stressing the role of the body in the tactile experience of watching films, intercultural cinema is seen to create an embodied experience of a diasporic or exiled past. This stands in contrast to the colonial, visual representation of history, the particularly Euro-American vision which maintains the privileging of sign over body in the construction of meaning In this way, by focusing on the liminal area of intercultural cinema, Marks stresses the agency of the diasporic artist working within a (potentially) culturally colonizing context. Works of cultural synthesis, the films which she discusses are involved in the creation of a creolizing counter-memory to that which officially attempts to visually define, or categorize, the diasporic community. It is for this reason that, in keeping with her definition of intercultural cinema as something that exists in the liminal space between dominant and diasporic cultures, so too are the films discussed by Marks repositioned between the categories in which they might usually be found.

The book also stresses its liminality through its refusal to stay within any one academic discipline. Marks's work, whilst gaining a sense of overall coherence from her diplomatic and often understated use of Deleuze's philosophy, also draws on such fields as art history, anthropology, feminism and phenomenology Whilst undoubtedly oriented towards the discipline of film studies, *The Skin of the Film* is an interdisciplinary work which implicitly challenges certain already existing categories within the field In particular these include the way in which Deleuze's philosophy is employed by film studies, the question of the nation in relation to a transnational genre, and the difficulties surrounding the interpretation of ethnographic representations

Marks's use of Deleuze should not put off those uninterested in his philosophical approach to film. Mostly it remains a backgrounded structuring rationale to the work Where her engagement with it is foregrounded, Deleuze's theory is used minimally and in a way that is easy to understand with little or no previous knowledge of his work. Nor is Deleuze's thought venerated unconditionally In Chapter One, for instance, Marks uses her criticism of Deleuze's understanding of the changes in the urban environment represented in postwar cinema in order to help her build her own theory of the intercultural. Regarding Deleuze's postwar paradigm through a filter informed by postcolonialism, Marks illustrates how his findings – concerning the 'kind of mutant' (p. 27) urban characters inhabiting the city spaces of postwar European cinema – appear somewhat xenophobic in their implication It is, after all, the diasporic.

postcolonial subject, as Marks points out, who best exemplifies the 'mutant' of which Deleuze speaks.

It is perhaps this critical understanding of Deleuze which ensures that Marks's work appears slightly more nuanced than Barbara Kennedy's recent, Deleuzian inspired, study of spectator subjectivity, *Deleuze and Cinema*.¹ Whilst sharing similar aims with Marks, especially concerning the deconstruction of the primacy of the visual in our understanding of the reception of films, Kennedy's work concentrates on a handful of particularly mainstream Euro-American films, including, *Leon* (Luc Besson, 1994), *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992) and *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996). Her model of molecular spectating thus appears somewhat universalizing in intent, when viewed in comparison to Marks's more specifically focused approach. In fact, Marks's work constantly foregrounds its awareness of the difficulty of understanding the intercultural without appealing to a universal principle. Its focus on the liminal status of the diaspora exposes precisely those problems faced when representing the local within the global.

In point of fact, although Marks seizes upon several aspects of Deleuze's cinema texts,² her main engagement is with the aspect of Deleuze's work that emerged from his engagement with Henri Bergson's philosophy. Enjoying something of a renaissance³ in British academia's study of philosophy since the 1990s, Bergson's work has also begun to provide valuable insights for film studies.⁴ It is Bergson, in fact, that Marks draws upon in large sections of Chapters One and Three. His work on time, for instance, and the return of the past in 'attentive recollection'⁵ (p. 48) is applied to the spectator of intercultural cinema by Marks. Using Bergson, Marks shows how memory can be a creative process for those caught in the space between a dominant cultural history that is not their own and a diasporic past which must continually be recreated to counter this official representation. Marks's unique take on Deleuze is ensured by her ability to graze on the sections of his work which help her construct her own theories. This hybridizing approach to Deleuze challenges the assumption that his work is only relevant to the study of the European art cinemas of the postwar new waves.

Marks's book also resonates with the growing body of work which challenges the sanctity of the nation as a sphere from within which to study a body of films.⁶ After all, the very notion of the intercultural overflows any sense of a safely bordered, racially exclusive, imagined community. Instead, *The Skin of the Film* suggests a new way of grouping together films produced in different nations. In this new context, at once global whilst remaining sensitive to the local, a film like *Handsworth Songs* (John Akomfrah, 1986) can now be positioned differently than it has been previously. Rather than a work which solely expresses British cinema's racial

1 Barbara Kennedy *Deleuze and Cinema: the Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

2 Gilles Deleuze *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image* (London: Athlone, 1983) and *Cinema 2: the Time-Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1985).

3 In particular John Mullarkey *Bergson and Philosophy* (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) and John Mullarkey (ed.) *The New Bergson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

4 Bergson's work is engaged in Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Kennedy *Deleuze and Cinema* Gregory Flaxman (ed.) *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (Minneapolis: MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

5 Marks is drawing on both Bergson's original coining of the term in Henri Bergson *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), ch. 2 and Deleuze's use of the term in Deleuze *Cinema 2* ch. 3.

6 This questioning has arisen in a variety of contexts, often with a particular focus on popular cinema. See for instance Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds) *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992). Andrew Higson *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Scott MacKenzie and Mette Hjort (eds) *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000). Dimitris Eleftheriotis *Popular Cinemas of Europe: Studies of Texts, Contexts and Frameworks* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

other, or its artisanal alternative to the mainstream, narrative feature film, it is seen instead as a part of a much broader movement. For Marks, the intercultural aesthetic constitutes a transnational 'genre' of films (p. 2). Although Marks herself plays an extremely influential role in the collation of this diverse material into a coherent body of work in order to suggest the existence of this genre, the point raised by her book remains, nonetheless, valid. Due to the liminal position of the postcolonial, intercultural diaspora, film studies must be cautious with its use of the idea of nation.

In fact, the role Marks plays in bringing these works into the same sphere is indicative of her additional argument in the text, that intercultural films themselves constitute a skin, contact with which brings together a diverse range of people. The small communities which view these non-commercially distributed films are, for Marks, brought into contact with, or contaminated by, them at every festival or private screening which they attend. In this way, through individual experiences and word of mouth, the films avoid the status of mechanically reproduced 'simulacra, endlessly available for reinterpretation' (p. 21). She continues:

Instead of being wrenched from one context to another, intercultural films multiply their contexts. Their very circulation is a kind of coalition building, reinforced by networks both ephemeral and concrete, from gossip and e-mail to community organizations, university classes, and funding agencies (p. 21).

This is a definition of genre that relies as much on the audience in its construction as it does on the aesthetics of the films themselves. The unique way in which distribution functions to characterize intercultural cinema as a genre sets it apart from any theory of genre constituted from within a national industrial interpretive paradigm.

Finally, in relation to the study of world cinemas from a Euro-American perspective, the intercultural film enables a reclamation of certain films which have previously been, often quite rightly, seen as guilty of orientalism in their depiction of indigenous populations. Although this reclamation is limited and must be approached with caution – as there is always the danger that the colonial gaze could be falsely excused its objectifying gaze – new room for manoeuvre is opened up by Marks's book. In her rightfully cautious analysis of *The Scent of Green Papaya* (Tran Anh Hung, 1983) in Chapter Four, for instance, a much more positive interpretation is given for the film's extremely lengthy use of closeups in its fetishization of Vietnamese food preparation and cooking. No longer the treatment of the people as insects of which Ousmane Sembène accused Jean Rouch,⁷ the use of closeup in intercultural cinema is seen as *deliberately* fetishizing objects touched, food tasted, and various aromas that evoke the lost homeland.

Marks's recuperation of the fetish in intercultural cinema centres

7 Ousmane Sembène 'Commes des insectes' *CinémaAction* no 17 (1982) pp 77–8

on the ability of an object, taste or smell to create a recollection of the past context from which it emerged though the spectator's haptic contact with it. This is, as she is at pains to point out in Chapter Two, in contrast to the visual representation of the other, the fetishization of which Rouch was guilty, and which has been critiqued, as she acknowledges, by such eminent theorists as Edward Said, Johannes Fabian, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Homi Bhabha (p. 85). In fact, against such strong opposition, Marks's positive recuperation of the fetish appears all the more impressive. By fusing Deleuze's idea of the fossil with Benjamin's idea of the photographic aura in Chapter Two, Marks argues that in its transnational cinematic movement, the intercultural fetish, or fossil image, has the power to evoke, or even to help create, the memory of its original context.

Marks is helped in this project by the strategic use of stills throughout the book. These include images of cloth being licked, hands touching bodies, traditional Chinese food being cooked and consumed in a western environment, and even of a tongue pushing chunks of tinned fruit into a nostril. Through touch, taste and smell, these stills help us to understand, the spectator experiences the past which could have been theirs, and which, in a sense, still is theirs to be reclaimed. In addition, many of the images Marks includes are deliberately out of focus, or closeups so extreme that the defining shape of the object itself is lost. Through these images we become aware of the way in which intercultural cinema asserts its independence from narrative-based, ocular-privileging, mainstream Euro-American representation. Denying the viewer visual mastery, these films suspend narrative in search of the fetish, the very skin of the film which, when embodied by the spectator's senses, enables the creation of an intercultural past.

Perhaps the only major difficulty with this work is that it runs the risk of relegating intercultural cinema to a folksy alternative to the mainstream that, once again, reinforces the latter's normative position. Marks also upholds the more avant-garde examples cited as somehow more authentic, and criticizes the movement into the mainstream of certain creators of intercultural cinema (pp. 3–4). Her claim, that the works which emerged between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s are perhaps evocative of a specific moment which is already over (p. 5), is, after all, to judge the movement into the mainstream of many artists as a loss, as opposed to a transition. It may be, alternatively, that what we are seeing is the mainstreaming of intercultural cinema. Whether or not this then remains intercultural cinema, or becomes, as Marks argues, hierarchized and multicultural as a result, and indeed, whether the intercultural thus becomes yet another category which needs to be rethought as a consequence, is the point at which Marks's work leaves us. The questions which her book asks of films studies in reaching this point, however, remain extremely pertinent.

Charlotte Brunson, *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (Oxford Television Studies Series). New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 253 pp.

ARVIND RAJAGOPAL

In the decades following the 1970s, young women have connected their identity to questions of empowerment in ways very different from those of their feminist predecessors. Questions of pleasure and fulfilment appear to be answered rather differently, and the didactic attitudes of 1970s feminism have often been qualified or rejected altogether. Charlotte Brunson argues that 1970s feminist arguments over soap opera offer a useful site for examining the sociological roots of the forms of feminism that later took shape. She presents a discussion of feminist television criticism, focusing on work on the soap opera between 1975 and 1986. The major contribution of this book is a series of interviews with feminist scholars who wrote on soap opera during this period, and Brunson's own close readings of these interviews. This is accompanied with critical self-reflection as well on her own experience as one of the scholars who helped to define this field. (Brunson records her own arrival at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies during its 'fiercely Althusserian moment'. There, as the media group debated whether to study political news or the domain of the everyday, Brunson and a colleague argued that studying soap opera would be the more interesting topic of research, but nevertheless went on to study the regional magazine news programme *Nationwide*, with Dorothy Hobson taking up the study of *Crossroads*.)

The point of departure for Brunson's book is the dramatic ascent of soap opera's status in educational institutions, in curricula and in academic criticism. Although soap opera had been successful for some time before that, it had not figured in school teaching or on

scholarly research agenda. Even as culturally sensitive explorations of television programming began to be undertaken, soap opera tended to be trivialized in relation to more serious programmes. Writing on soap opera was undertaken by critics in the period in which the women's movement began to move from the streets into the academy, and women made a claim for a more institutionalized identity, first via 'women's liberation' and later through feminism itself, a shift Brunsdon locates in the mid 1970s. What, Brunsdon asks, was the character of the self-production of the feminist critic in this process of engagement with a popular television genre such as soap opera?

Brunsdon's purpose is not to undertake a study of the soap opera or of feminism, nor is it specifically to analyze the paradigms according to which mass cultural artefacts were constructed as objects of study, although she offers many insights into these questions. Rather, her main goal is to critique constructions of gender by examining the rendezvous between soap opera and feminist critics, observed across texts as well as live encounters. If the ground of criticism has been a topic of debate in cultural and television studies, Brunsdon distils the concerns of those debates to ask, what is the site of enunciation of criticism in soap opera studies? That is, how does the (female) feminist critic position herself *vis-à-vis* 'ordinary women'? She locates a set of contradictions here. On the one hand, feminists desire to speak for or on behalf of 'ordinary women'; on the other hand, they wish to educate and empower them. An uneasy relationship to femininity as well as to the figure of the 'average' woman is expressed through feminism, Brunsdon argues. Tracing the ways in which this relationship is negotiated can illuminate the position of feminist criticism and broaden our appreciation of the insights achieved by feminist scholarship. How does a feminist scholar operate as both anthropologist and native informant, both subject studying and subject studied? Brunsdon pursues this classic hermeneutic dilemma with specific reference to the work of five feminist scholars of soap opera, asking how they addressed and resolved it. The core of the book contains Brunsdon's interviews with Christine Geraghty, Dorothy Hobson, Terry Lovell, Ien Ang and Ellen Seiter, providing a valuable archive for those interested in both television studies and feminist cultural studies. All of these scholars watched and enjoyed soap opera, and thus the pleasure they wrote about was also in part their own. What this results in, Brunsdon points out, is the greater sophistication of their analysis.

Questions she asks them include: how they started doing research on soap opera, and why; what kinds of reactions they got from others when doing the project; how the category 'woman' is constructed in their account of their research; and how they themselves figure in relation to this category.

She begins with an examination of the personae involved in 1940s radio soap opera research in the USA, through the work of Rudolf Arnheim and Helen Kaufman on the radio soap opera audience, and that of Herta Herzog. These early researchers agreed that soap operas were socially significant, and as yet inadequately understood, but regarded soap as a distraction from more urgent matters of public concern. Valorizing the public sphere as categorically superior to the private, these scholars were not sensitive to the gendered construction of these categories themselves. A subsequent generation of scholars, represented here in the work of Carol Lopate, Michele Mattelart and Tania Modleski, challenged these received ideas. Tania Modleski, for instance, argued that the formal characteristics of soap opera, such as repetition, interruption and lack of resolution, were compatible with a feminist aesthetics (p. 63). If Laura Mulvey had contended that the forms through which the audience was addressed were crucial to the work of the media, and that questions of genre or of the medium *per se* were secondary, here was a way of rescuing women's pleasure in the media, and not succumbing to an all-powerful male gaze constructed by Hollywood. However, soap opera connotes conventional femininity, while feminism implies an unconventional femininity, and thus assumes an antipathy to the former. What then is a feminist scholar's view of this problematic relationship to ordinary women? Brunsdon's hypothesis is that much feminist intellectual work on popular feminine genres was motivated and legitimated by the imagination of a non-feminist female 'the housewife', 'the ordinary woman', 'the average soap fan'.

Third-wave feminism's challenges to serene evocations of global sisterhood, from the global south and from women of colour, clearly make it difficult to endorse any automatic identification with the category 'woman'. Second-wave feminism, prominent in the 1970s, tended to champion such an identification, however. Brunsdon's interviews help to indicate that the apparently seamless surface of the latter, with its monolithic front, emerges as more fractured and more self-conscious in the recollections of some of its participants.

Brunsdon presents brilliant readings of her material, describing at length the twists and turns taken by her interlocutors as they seek to define a position for themselves. What makes her intervention fascinating is her attempt to read in this set of scholarly engagements not simply ideas about the soap operas as such, but changing modes of feminist identification as they shifted over time, and of the pedagogical project of criticism as it evolved during this period. She unsettles placid assumptions about the referential value of words such as 'women' and 'feminism', demonstrating the complexity of meanings to be uncovered in the ways they are narrativized in conversation.

Thus Christine Geraghty, for instance, observes at one point, 'I think one of the reasons I watch soap is that the soaps assume that

women are good at your personal life, and can handle all these things and they kind of value the way in which women do things' (p. 190) Soap opera, presented as a fiction of femininity, is seen to create and assuage both anxiety and desire. Ellen Seiter for her part, speculates that soap operas probably help women tackle an extraordinary level of pain and suffering, partly by distraction, but partly because soaps are designed to deal with women's suffering in particular. We learn that she experienced this most intensely when she was dealing with her own mother's hospitalization, and, experiencing a sense of recognition ('now I understand why it's really there'), did not want to talk about it anymore.

Historical distance, and perhaps also the ascendancy of soap opera in the academy, seems to permit the fuller recognition of the women who wrote letters to *Ien Ang* and answered Janice Radway's questions, and of those women who 'worried responsibly' in their different ways about the world at large when immersing themselves in the low-cultural world of soap opera. Brunsdon had surmised that those who comprised second-wave feminism were predominantly daughters in rebellion against their mothers and trying to be as unlike them as possible. She notes that second-wave feminism was an attempt to define a different way of being a woman, defined against conventional femininity. But in the interviews, conventional femininity itself appears as partly constructed, multiple and shifting in character rather than essentialized. At least in retrospect, the consciousness of second-wave feminism does not appear to replicate its historical limits as a movement.

In her conclusion Brunsdon suggests that soap opera research is not necessarily going to be a site of productive insights for the present generation of scholars, based on her reading of the interviews she has conducted. The study of the soap opera, she reminds us, is the study of a subaltern field, and such study was innovatory because it challenged the gendered character of the hierarchy by which it was delegated to a subaltern status. New challenges may require the constitution of new objects of study, and will necessitate the production of new positions from which to intervene.

It is perhaps worth asking how soap operas rendered themselves insufficient as a site for feminist subject-formation, and what larger aspects of the historical process should be brought into view to pursue the implications of Brunsdon's insight. This links to a broader question Brunsdon raises at the outset, that of the dilemmas of television and cultural studies as we move into an era of 'post-public service broadcasting'. As the character of the public sphere and perceptions of what constitutes effective politics change, cultural studies too must engage in the theoretical task of reassessing its objects of study, at the risk of losing its relevance. Brunsdon indicates that the study of soap opera was useful in one phase of political growth. Meanwhile thousands of students worldwide are

reared on this kind of study, indexing the growing significance of centrally orchestrated forms of consumption as a socializing institution. In my view, Brunsdon's important book prepares us to refocus our attention on this wider concern of the changing configurations of consumption, and the place of gender amidst technologies that systematically disturb attempts to align public and private alongside the conventional opposition of masculine and feminine.

Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* London and New York: Continuum, 2000, 275 pp.

CHRIS HOLMLUND

Brigitte Bardot, Jean Gabin, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Gérard Depardieu, Jeanne Moreau, Catherine Deneuve, Alain Delon . . . the French *vedettes*, *étoiles* and *monstres sacrés* – ten *in toto* – that Ginette Vincendeau studies in *Stars and Stardom* possess more glamour, panache and appeal than most Hollywood stars. Though not necessarily top box-office draws and not always beloved across the decades, all are nevertheless major stars, renowned both in France and abroad. All have had long careers, and all have been culturally significant in ways which Vincendeau skilfully outlines, making her book a welcome complement to existing auteur and historical studies of French film, and a welcome intervention in more general work on stardom.

Packed with information about changing production modes and film styles, previous and contemporaneous acting traditions, and economic and political contexts, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* builds on the work of Richard Dyer and others while adding specifically French flavours to the mix, as Vincendeau explicates how nuances of gesture, hairstyle, accent, intonation and attire all confer spice. The extensive bibliography and end-of-chapter filmographies provide scores of sources, and illustrations ranging from telephone cards to postage stamps, publicity shots and film stills add aura.

Stardom, argues Vincendeau, is different in France than in the UK or the USA: stars play a larger role in cultural life and are more often politically involved. More personable and more 'ordinary' as well (Juliette Binoche lives modestly; many, Depardieu among them, like to cook – we can see he likes to eat!), French stars are protected from prying eyes by privacy laws that Tom Cruise must envy. In

addition, they are free to control their own images to a greater extent than either British or American film actors.

Vincendeau structures her individual analyses around contradictions, teasing out connections between female and male stars. For example, the chapter on Gabin concentrates on the opposing values embodied by the actor in his youth and old age. Much more, of course has been said on this subject (including by Vincendeau herself in *Jean Gabin Anatomie d'un mythe*),¹ and a single chapter cannot do justice to someone whose career spanned forty-plus years and who became a national legend on a par with de Gaulle. I wished in particular for more explanation of Gabin's 'sensitivity' and 'femininity'. Vincendeau does here succinctly delineate how and why Gabin went from being the epitome of a romantic working-class '*homme fatal*' (p. 62) in the 1930s to playing well-to-do (if still working-class) patriarchs after the war. The financial success of his later screen characters, she notes, was applauded by working-class audiences who saw in it 'the vindication of working-class heroes who had "made it" but who at the same time remained "one of them"' (p. 77). Yet though clearly in tune with the more materialist, individualist, times of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the shift was thoroughly unpopular with new wave critics, filmmakers and fans (among them, for a time, Vincendeau) they loathed the resolutely, robustly, conservative figure cut by the aging Gabin.

Other chapters, in particular those on Bardot and Deneuve, unpack associations between fashion, femininity and a – very French – brand of 'feminism'. Bardot, Vincendeau maintains, appealed to 1950s and 1960s French and international consumer culture through her skimpy clothing, lack of a girdle, and her loose hair, addressing a growing (Americanized) youth market much as Madonna did in the 1980s. Bardot was never all that popular with French audiences, however, because her 'liberated' image contrasted so sharply with the restrictions (no right to abortion, no access to birth control) weighing on French women at the time. In contrast, the 'only living divinity', Deneuve, today incarnates cool (lesbian) designer chic, effortlessly packaging propriety with perversity from the 1960s to the 1990s, and moving beyond Grace Kelly to an androgynous splendour more reminiscent of Gérard Depardieu, who, reports Vincendeau, once dubbed Deneuve 'the man I would have liked to be' (pp. 198, 206).

As in her work elsewhere, Vincendeau is keenly interested here in how national values are embodied through gender differences. She posits that male stars are more typically associated with historical representations, female stars with allegorical ones. Note, coincidentally, both Bardot and Deneuve have posed as 'Marianne', heroine of the French Revolution, whereas – especially in middle age – both Gabin and Depardieu have specialized in historical dramas and adaptations of classic literary texts. Appearances in comedies,

1 Claude Gauteur and Ginette Vincendeau *Jean Gabin Anatomie d'un mythe* (Paris: Nathan, 1993)

too, 'make' the French movie 'man' from Max Linder to Depardieu, and crime films are also key. The upshot, asserts Vincendeau, is that 'whereas French female stars have only been able to develop sexual types (Musidora "the vamp", Viviane Romance "the bitch", Brigitte Bardot "the sex kitten", Catherine Deneuve "the ice maiden", Juliette Binoche "the emotional *gamine*"), male stars have had the latitude to create socially coded types and stereotypes' (p. 219).

The new wave is central to Vincendeau's project, not only because new wave films were crucial to her own film formation and the majority of the stars examined appeared in films between 1959 and 1964. Rather, and unlike certain French critics who disdain and ignore popular cinema, Vincendeau is intent on demonstrating how important it is to the survival of these stars – indeed to the French film industry – that art and auteur films be linked to and studied together with mainstream movies. Thus Vincendeau argues that far from 'killing' French cinema, Belmondo and Delon contributed to its survival in the home market *because* they made popular genre films and not just art films. A related phenomenon might be the ongoing appeal of the seventy-something Jeanne Moreau – now most often seen on talk shows or showcased in television dramas, her heavy lids, eye-bags and pouting mouth continue to promise sophistication and sensuality just as they always did in closeups for Louis Malle, François Truffaut and Marguerite Duras.

Throughout, Vincendeau underlines the unique connections that operate in France between theatre and film: with the exception of Bardot and Deneuve (I am not clear about Delon), the stars she appraises all received theatrical training and/or appeared first on stage; most (including Delon) go from movies to plays and back again over the course of their careers. This, she explains, is eminently logical: while a continent separates New York and Los Angeles, the proximity of Paris and the provinces facilitates movement from stage to screen. From the 1980s, moreover, shrinking home audiences and the huge rise in television and video ownership prompted further diversification. As one example, Vincendeau observes that many French stars, not just Maurice Chevalier or Yves Montand, have been associated with song; other 'sidelines' include film production, wine-growing and cosmetics lines.

The most useful chapters of *Stars and Stardom* will likely be those devoted to two stars who are today less well known. The first, on silent star Max Linder, compellingly calls for a fresh look at his films, for some years available in two video collections, *The Man in the Silk Hat/L'homme au chapeau de soie* and *Laugh with Max Linder*, aka *Pop Goes the Cork/En compagnie de Max Linder*. The first truly international star and a prime model for Charlie Chaplin (Chaplin dedicated a photo to him with the following words: 'To the one and only Max. The Professor. From his disciple Charlie Chaplin' [p. 142]). Linder is today little known even in France, in part

because his films fell out of distribution, but also because he appears so literally as well as figuratively distant: usually filmed in medium- or long-shot, his character, a dandy in a top hat, is self-absorbed and occasionally arrogant. Among the observations Vincendeau offers in this chapter is a lovely (psycho)analysis of the importance a tall top hat can have for a little man.

For me, the 'find' of the book is Louis de Funès, aka 'Fufu' to his many French fans. Despised by critics as *too* popular, de Funès was adored by French audiences for his incarnation of crotchety, aggressive, mugging bureaucrats in one family film after another. Vincendeau carefully elucidates the wordplay of the titles and glosses the meanings behind de Funès's furious movements and exaggerated facial expressions. After reading her discussion here I cannot wait to try teaching a de Funès film, even though – or *because* – he is so unpopular with US and UK audiences. My interest is, I confess, piqued by the reasons Vincendeau advances for our dislike of the man's movies: as she puts it, de Funès was "not French enough" for outsiders' (that is, neither elegant nor intellectual nor seductive). Yet by presenting 'an inverted mirror to contemporary ideals of masculinity, whether the glamorous macho ideals of Belmondo and Delon or the narcissistically tormented heroes of *auteur* cinema', his work 'had a more menacing tone', full of 'latent rage and discontent'. 'De Funès's comedy', she concludes, 'was not so "nice" after all' (p. 151).

Eminently readable, all chapters except the introduction supply in-depth analyses of three or so films, discussing them in light of each star's total *oeuvre*. Many also provide concise introductions and conclusions. For my money, this makes *Stars and Stardom* an extremely useful – and, thanks to the stars themselves, sexy – addition to survey courses on French cinema. I look forward to using it in my own class.